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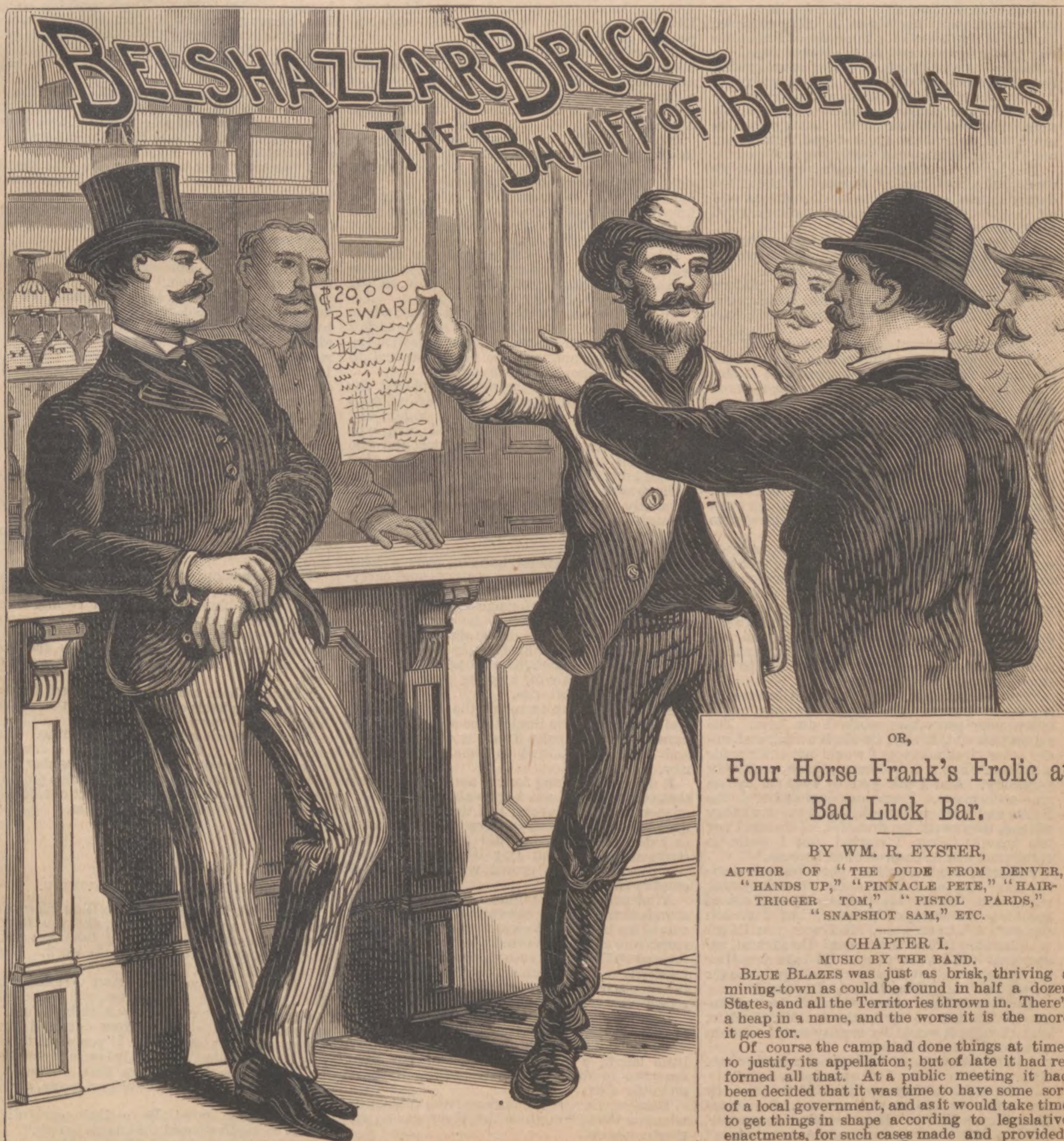
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VERY GINGERLY THE BAILIFF OPENED OUT THE PAPER AND HANDED IT TO THE ALCALDE.

OR,
**Four Horse Frank's Frolic at
Bad Luck Bar.**

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "THE DUDE FROM DENVER,"
"HANDS UP," "PINNACLE PETE," "HAIR-
TRIGGER TOM," "PISTOL PARDS,"
"SNAPSHOT SAM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MUSIC BY THE BAND.

BLUE BLAZES was just as brisk, thriving a mining-town as could be found in half a dozen States, and all the Territories thrown in. There's a heap in a name, and the worse it is the more it goes for.

Of course the camp had done things at times to justify its appellation; but of late it had reformed all that. At a public meeting it had been decided that it was time to have some sort of a local government, and as it would take time to get things in shape according to legislative enactments, for such cases made and provided, temporary arrangements were made, which, so far, had been working very well.

Colonel Wildmont, manager and principal stockholder of the Trump Card Mine was proposed for alcalde, and unanimously elected.

It was understood, however, that the colonel would only be called on as a last resort, or in intricate cases. The police arrangements of the town were put in the hands of a marshal, who was also a justice of the peace, with jurisdiction over all offenders he chanced to arrest.

Belshazzar Brick was the man for whom this office was especially made. No one else in camp would have undertaken it; and probably no one else would have been able to carry out its duties.

Things had not been in this shape very long, and it was uncertain how Belshazzar was going to succeed. So far he had met with no particular resistance, and was running things very nicely.

It was true that Brick, according to popular belief, was slightly off in his upper story, but it was only on one subject. He was one of the oldest settlers in the modern Blue Blazes, and people had become so accustomed to his mania that it did not count for much. Some of the boys would still occasionally get him excited over Four Horse Frank, a supposed mythical individual, for whom he was always on the lookout, but who never came. As Belshazzar was a standard Good Samaritan, and the friend of every man except this Four Horse Frank, it was supposed that the latter had at some time done him an injury which had in somewhat warped his senses. There was a story to the effect that he had treacherously attacked him, having stolen on him with a club, and almost beaten his brains out.

Notwithstanding this weakness, there was no question about his fitness in other respects. Outside of his hatred for Four Horse Frank, he was as evenly balanced as the best of them. A little slow in his speech, perhaps; but "getting there all the same," with tongue, fists or sixes.

There was not in all Blazes a stouter man, or one who could shoot as perfect a string in less time. He was deliberate in making up his mind, but, once made up, it stayed right there, and the whole camp was ready to gamble on it.

The boys now and then took advantage of his weak point, and induced him to talk about the enemy he was so anxious to meet; but that was all in good-humor, and had never been carried too far.

So the marshal strolled about Blue Blazes, wearing a little star on his breast, and two revolvers at his belt, a terror to evil-doers.

He was going past "The Spotted Dog" Saloon one evening, when he was hailed through the open door by Johnny Wardle, the affable bartender.

"Hyer, Belshazzar! Somebody's lookin' for you. I suppose he's a human bein'; but he ain't the sort we're used to, and I guess he's kinder lost. Size him up and see what you make of him. The boys would have had him in four-quarters and a lot of pieces by this time if they hadn't seen you coming down the street. They're itchin' to begin on him."

The marshal looked in the direction indicated by Johnny's finger, and had a chance to see how much his election had done for law and order. Such young men as the one stepping forward used to get into trouble when they ventured into Blue Blazes.

He was a rather thin young man, in a check suit, with short sleeves, and no tail to speak of to the coat. He had a "b'iled" shirt, choker collar, cuffs of glaring breadth, hat and shoes to match, and gold-rimmed eye-glasses.

He moved with a mincing air, and held a slender cane and a bit of cardboard in his fingers. He held out the card, and when Belshazzar took it he applied the knob of the cane to his lips and stood patiently silent, until perused.

"Gerald Sinclair, sir-ah, as you can see by my card. I have business in this city, and I claim your protection while I am here. The reputation of this city, sir-ah, is awful, and under other circumstances I would not enter it for a million. But it is necessary, sir-ah, positively necessary. And I ask you to keep an eye on me—a sharp eye. I am unacquainted with the habits and customs here-ah, but from what they tell me, they must be dreadful. I insured my life heavily before I started, but I begin to think that will be no protection here-ah."

"Spotted Dog's a mighty good place to come fur fun," responded Belshazzar when the young man, with one of his peculiar gasps, ceased speaking for want of breath, "but I reckon fun ain't what you want. If I war you I'd git up inter ther loft ov ther Grand Occidental, an' stay thar tell I went away. I'll take yer thar ef yer says so, but I allow I ain't got time ter go taggin' round Blue Blazes, after you."

The marshal did not speak in the best of humors. He had no sympathy for Mr. Sinclair, and thought it would be cruelty to the citizens to take him under his wing.

"But, bless my soul! I just came from there-ah. I must look around. I want to find a man."

"You'll be mighty apt ter find a dozen ov 'em, and—say! did yer ever meet a rustler named Four Horse Frank? He's travelin' somewhar, an' I'm waitin' ter see him, an' git even, afore I die."

Sinclair reflected, before answering.

"I am not sure, but I, ah, almost think the name is familiar. A tough man, given to shooting, and loud of talk—one you would not like to meet alone. From his own talk, a cut-throat, a gambler and assassin. Is that the man, ah?"

"I'm not so sure," retorted Brick, putting his hand to his head, a puzzled look stealing over his face.

"I don't prezactly remember; but it don't seem he war jest that sort ov a man. But, mebbe he war; mebbe he war. You don't happen ter remember what he looked like?"

"All bat, whiskers, an' pistols, sir-ah. That was the way he looked from a distance. I did not care to look at him closely. He might have taken offense, ah. He was at Walnut Bar a week ago, but I haven't the ghost of an idea where he is now."

"Thankee, young man. Four Horse Frank are the man I'm lookin' fur, every day now. He may come ter-night. Ez fur you—keep your eyes open. If I'm about, I'll see ther boys don't hit you too hard; but ez Marshal ov Blue Blazes I've got ter keep moovin'. When I'm outen ther way you bedn't better pervoke 'em too fur."

"Thanks, awfully, I, ah, would be pleased to have you and the other gentlemen drink with me, at my expense, ah. It seems to be about that time now."

"Yer head ain't so fur from bein' level ez I thought. Walk up, boys. My friend, Mr. Sinclair, sez ter j'ine."

The invitation met with ready acceptance; and for a moment the young man was as popular as any one. Johnny Wardle strung out all the available glasses of the establishment, and the decanters passed along from hand to hand. Everybody nodded to Sinclair, and several slapped him genially on the back.

Then everybody bolted his whisky, flung down his glass, and rushed to the door. There was a new attraction outside; and one that came so seldom that it was quite a novelty. Three wandering musicians had halted in front of the Spotted Dog.

Johnny Wardle, even, having turned the key in the money-drawer, ran with the rest.

"Oh, have 'em inside, Johnny, have 'em inside! That's where we want 'em!"

The advice was scarcely needed. Johnny knew the value of a crowd to the fraction of a hair; and as the musicians ceased their first tune, he invited them in.

Ranged along the wall at one side the trio fell to work again, and every one had a chance to see what they looked like. Outside, in the dark, they could hardly be made out.

The leader was a rather aged Italian, whose ragged locks were sprinkled with gray, and his shoulders bowed. He touched his harp with the air of a master, and while he played seemed to have his whole soul in the music.

Then, there was a young man who played the violin, and looked around over the crowd with an eye to reckoning up the possible dollars and probable dimes; and a black-eyed girl, who looked enough like him to be his sister, and who played the tambourine with an easy grace that seemed born of much practice.

There was a fourth one of the party, who kept discreetly in the background, as if he had learned a thing or two during his contact with the mining population, and was anxious to keep out of harm's way.

This fourth individual, however, was a long-tailed monkey, dressed in a uniform, and carrying a stick shaped something like a gun. He had his part in the performance, though not till further on. For the present he squatted in the corner, and with his shoulders shrugged, and his tail curled stiffly over his head, looked around in a furtive way, as though he thought there might be danger in the air for a young man of about his size and importance.

Still, as the harp twanged, the violin wailed, and the tambourine jingled, the attention of the crowd was principally fixed on the musicians, and Jacko was allowed to remain in his obscurity.

It did not take long for the audience to decide that the orchestra was a little above the average of such strolling players; and the applause that greeted each rendition was gradually increasing in enthusiasm. If they did not make a ten-strike at the Spotted Dog it would be because the pockets of this crowd were a good deal emptier than usual.

After perhaps ten minutes devoted to sweet sounds there was an intermission. The leader waved his hand and looked toward the tambourinist who at once inverted her instrument and stepped out into the crowd, passing along in a fearlessly modest manner, holding out the tambourine to each man as she passed, and generally receiving a very liberal offering.

In front of Gerald Sinclair she paused, staring at him in seeming surprise. Before he could draw his hand out of his pocket she gave a short little laugh, a coquettish shake of her head, drew the tambourine hastily away, and passed on to the next.

There was a roar of laughter from those near, who saw the action, for which there was no particular reason.

Sinclair stared open-mouthed at the damsel and then at the crowd, not fully understanding

what had happened, but recognizing that the laugh was at him. A flush began to show itself on his forehead; he made a step or two after the coy damsel; and then halted suddenly.

Something about the girl had, thus far, commanded a certain respect from the men at the Spotted Dog. The crowd there had the gilding pretty well taken off from the corners long enough before; but they had the rude chivalry that the sex feminine generally meets with in the mining-camps, so long as there is no evidence that it is not due. The fact of her being there on the invitation of Johnny Wardle had nothing to do with it; and Johnny was too busy with his business to think of it either.

A few steps beyond Sinclair the girl encountered a man of a different stripe—of a class with whom she ought, perhaps, to have been better acquainted.

"Hold it stiddy, leetle gal, hold it stiddy! It's only silver, but it's a pocket ter go fur, an' ef you can't kerry it yer ole man kin afford ter hire a boss. Roarin' Rob allers does ther thing in style, an' don't yer furgit it."

It was this hoarse, coarse voice that caused Gerald Sinclair to halt so suddenly, and stare with some concern at the speaker.

For that matter a good many others were interested in the game. Roaring Rob had been guilty of some foolish things in his time, but, as he was an expert in arguing 'most any question, and always argued with his revolvers when there was any serious difference of opinion, the boys of Blue Blazes were not, as a general thing, anxious to contradict him.

A hard drinker was Bob Barker, and when in battle a wicked fighter. There were few men in Blue Blazes who cared to face him with naked hands; and not many that could shoot as good a string. Drink as deeply as he might no one had ever seen his nerves unbinged, or his hand unsteady.

Yet Barker was always full of boisterous good nature till he was crowded, and if there was a rough practical joke in camp, that raised a general laugh, Roaring Rob was generally the perpetrator.

It was something in the way of a joke that he perpetrated just now; and he never would have warned a man.

As he finished speaking, he carelessly flung into the tambourine a double handful of silver.

"Thanka!"

The smile on the girl's face made her look actually beautiful, but her wrists never dropped the fraction of an inch.

"Welcome yer are, leetle woman. It's jest half ther pot I raked in off ov Slim Ikey; an' hyar's ther other half fur one square kiss, with all ther boys lookin' on ter hev ther mouths water. Turn up yer bugle, leetle gal, while Roarin' Rob sips ther double distilled extract ov honey an' dew. It won't hurt yer, and thar's a heap ov coin—"

Robert had been drinking—drinking hard—or he would scarcely have ventured on such an insult. As he spoke he leaned forward and grasped an arm of the tambourinist, who uttered a cry of dismay, and then, with her other hand, struck him a sharp blow on the cheek.

"Scat, thar! Would yer? Easy now, an' ther boys'll see I'm yer best friend!"

He caught the other wrist before her hand had fairly left his cheek, and drew her toward him.

Then, somehow, the crowd surged toward him; some one, it was impossible to say who, struck him a blow that sent him reeling away, carrying the girl with him, though he dropped her wrists in an instant, recovered himself, and sprang straight at the crowd, just as the Marshal of Blue Blazes made his way toward the spot.

"Put up them tools, thar!" shouted Belshazzar, his own pistols coming into sight as he saw half a dozen drawn.

He was a shade late with his warning. There came, as answer, the sharp crack of a revolver, a cry and a groan, followed by a regular fusillade, in the midst of which there was a jingle of breaking glass, and the lights went out, leaving the place involved in utter darkness.

CHAPTER II.

FOUR HORSE FRANK IS COMING.

"SAY, Al, if you go down to Blue Blazes just now, they'll spot you at once, and you may as well take a coffin along. You take my advice and pay somebody else to do the work. You'll live a heap longer."

"Don't trouble yourself about Arkansaw Al. He'll get there when he arrives, and you can bet your bottom dollar it will be with both feet. Be around when the hearse goes out, and you'll swear you don't know me. If you want to send any letters while I'm down below, address them to Four Horse Frank. I'm tired to death of hearing a name that don't belong to me, and I'll try one that does."

"Oh, come now! Be a little careful! It seems to me I've heard that name before."

"Of course you have. Mexican Mike shot an individual sailing under that name, 'way up in

Oregon; but it's not every man that hails from Oregon, or knows of the scrimmage. It will take a year for the news to travel down here. Be good to yourself, old man. The stage goes in ten minutes, and I don't want you to come around to see me off. Might make somebody's eyes open. Ta, ta. I'll see you later. I've just got time to do my dressing."

The speaker nodded, and sailed away, while the other looked after him with a doubting gaze; and once lifted his foot in a hesitating way, as though almost determined to follow.

Then he laughed and shrugged his shoulders, muttering to himself:

"To what good? Arkansaw Al is a man, full grown, and generally supposed to be able to take care of himself. He'll go his own way in spite of anything I could say. But, if there's any one that wants to take even money to a reasonable extent I'm open to a bet that there will be news of a lively time at Blue Blazes shortly after he arrives. Hope he won't break out before he gets there. I believe I'll have a peep at the stage, anyhow, and see what he's going to look like."

Dan Garland was a good enough man to tie to; and if he did not obey the request, he took care that his appearance should work no harm. He strolled along so leisurely, and arrived at the station so casually that Long Jim, just gathering up the reins, could have no suspicion that he had any interest in his fares; and no one else would be likely to notice him at all.

Arkansaw Al was already in his place; the rest of the passengers had settled in their seats; crack went the whip; 'round went the wheels; and the hearse rolled away, and out of town.

But Dan Garland still kept up the illusion. No particular interest showed itself in his face; as he turned away. If any hidden reason for his presence could be guessed from his appearance, it would have been that he was expecting to meet a man, and was strolling about to kill the time.

Some one else had an interest, though.

Just as the coach went around the bend, something like a hundred yards away, a man came dashing down the street shouting and swinging his hat.

So earnest was this man's pursuit that he paid but little attention to the manner of his going, and very suddenly did he come to grief. His foot struck a stone, and he pitched forward heavily right into Garland's arms.

"Stiddy by jerks, my honest friend! What's the matter with you?" exclaimed Garland, as he put the party upon his feet, and, still holding him by the collar, stared keenly into his face.

To Garland things were never exactly what they seemed. Perhaps this man was chasing the stage; but then, there was a bare possibility that he was after him.

At any rate, the man who had practiced the seemingly involuntary gymnastics was a total stranger; and very much cut up he seemed to be over missing the stage. Out of breath he spoke:

"Matter enough! If I don't get to Blue Blazes there's murder done! I'm a poor man, but this is a thing I wouldn't have had happen for a thousand."

"Sorry, my friend," said Garland, looking as though he was more disgusted than interested.

"If it's so important it's a great consolation that you can go over betimes for about the interest of that money; and the coach was full, anyhow. The walking ain't so bad. Take it all around I don't know but what you're a lucky fellow. Any one else would have broken his neck. And then, the hearse may be held up. Oh, I wouldn't growl till there's something to growl at. Life ain't all peaches and cream. Good-day!"

Garland strolled away as he finished his paternal advice, though he was not as unconcerned as he appeared.

"I wish I could give him a hint or a warning," was what he was thinking.

"There's something not altogether straight about that fellow, though I can't recall his face. If he had only been the average man, he'd have knocked my head off, instead of taking my chaff without a whimper. I've got something of his measure, though, and I'll put Steve on his trail. It can't do any hurt, and it may be worth while to know something more about him."

Garland was as good as his word, and Step-soft Steve took up the trail without delay.

Steve was a perfect shadower, and could work to orders; but his own opinions were not always the right of brilliancy. He did enough to prove, as he thought, that Garland need have no especial interest in the stranger, who was booked as John Clinton, of Tubac, and then went to bed at his usual hour. The following morning he was somewhat surprised to hear that a stranger from Tubac, who was registered at the Travelers' Home as John Clinton, had been killed the night before at Charley Sample's dance-house. That ought to end his as well as Dan Garland's interest.

Garland's statement that the stage was full, had to be taken with a grain of salt.

In appearance the vehicle was comfortably filled, though in reality there was room for about one-third more passengers. Every seat

inside had two occupants, and it was a recognized truth that each was intended to carry three.

On the back seat was a young lady who seemed strangely out of place, since she was not only well-dressed, but handsome, and was traveling alone. Her fellow-passengers, from the few words they had heard her speak, and from her dark hair and eyes, decided that she was Mexican; while Arkansas Al discovered that her name was Marquita Garcia, and that she claimed Chihuahua as her place of residence.

This young lady looked and listened as though interested in what she did not half understand, and kept entirely and discreetly silent.

There was no particular reason for Arkansas Al to keep silent, and he gave a pretty free rein to his tongue. Before the stage had gone a dozen miles, every one knew that his name was Four Horse Frank, and they suspected that, if there was any cutting or shooting, any card-playing or deep drinking in his neighborhood, he might be depended on to take his share in the labor.

This place happened to be on the front seat, his back to the horses, so that he had a fair view of his fellow-travelers, and perhaps he may have noted that his boisterous style was not altogether popular. If so, he gave no sign. His conversation, for the most part, if it had any particular direction, was addressed to a little, old man in a threadbare suit of brown, who occupied the middle seat, and was immediately in front of the young Mexican lady.

The man in brown scarcely seemed to relish it, but the talk went on steady as a mill-stream.

"Yes, boyees," he said, complacently. "There's been considerable goin' on in my time, an' you could allers rely on findin' Four Horse Frank in ther thick ov it. Frazer's River or Chiriqui—it didn't make much difference whar ther rush war—he went with ther stream."

"Chiriqui? Ah! Humph!" said the old man of the threadbare suit.

"Ye'r' right; and a heap ov fun we had thar. Bin thar yerself, mebbe?"

The old gentleman looked thoughtful as he slowly drew out an old-fashioned snuff-box, and with great deliberation took a pinch.

"Some years ago, sir; some years ago. I should judge that the rush to Chiriqui occurred before you were born."

"Shows how fur a man kin be out. I kerry my age like a snappin'-torkle, an' I'm a heap older than I look. I war a kid then, I jedge, say ov twelve, mebbe; an' 'bout so high."

The pseudo-Frank made an illustrative gesture with his hand, and looked keenly at the old man.

"Pears ter me I seen yer thar. Age tells, an' you've changed a heap, 'siderin' I ain't happened ter strike yer sence; but I want ter know ef you ain't Johnny More, ez got his hull outfit in a peck ov trouble fer shootin' a Injun squaw? An' mebbe I don't jest disremember layin' low all night in a bloody old graveyard with you and yer pards, an' mebbe you didn't rise right out ov a grave whar some ov ther boys had bin perspectin', and drop a buck thet stood in front ov ther moon, when she popped up over ther hills? Oh, I war only a kid, an', ez yer say, it's a heap long time; but when I strike a cold fact, I jest put her in my pocket an' salt her down."

"Ah, ahem!" said the old gentleman, slightly confused, if the signs went for anything.

"Probably something of the kind may have occurred; but certainly not with me; though my name is John More."

"Oh, yes; I know it like a book. Thar war you, an' Si Davis—Short Si they called him—an' French Phil, in yer gang, an' I'll bet a heap yer remembers me like a book. I used ter kerry an old-style pepper-box, an' 'muse myself shootin' ther bills off ov ther hummin'-bird at say thirty yard. How did yer make out down South? Thar ort ter bin good pickin's, ef a man looked after biz. Last thing I seen you war steerin' fur Honduras."

Mr. More took snuff again, and remained discreetly silent. The dialogue had revived the attention of the passengers, and public opinion rather seemed to favor the veracity of Four Horse Frank, who continued, leaving his victory apparently unnoticed:

"Yes, me an' Dave—Tiger Dave they called him—was a hull team, an' a dog under ther wagon, an' ary one ez met us couldn't furtit us ef they tried. I'm owin' him all I ever got ter be; an' ef I could only find his bones, I'd put a marble monymint over 'em, with gilt letters all round ther edges, pore Dave! He went under, an' ther kid war left. Looked like a swindle at ther time, but mebbe it war best all 'round it war so."

"Dave is dead, then, is he?"

Mr. More asked the question with reviving interest.

"I should so jedge. Went off in a solemn, jolly sort ov way, too. Up on ther Columby River. B'ar broke his leg, an' we got froze in. Water solid ter bed rock, an' snow a million feet deep—more er less. Out on snow-shoes, chasing deer. Came back in ther dusk, an' found Dave hed bin havin' visitors. Wolves, yer understand—droves ov 'em. Heard his rifle

an' revolvers a-goin', an' I slid out at a keen jump, but I got thar too late. Ther wolves war a-goin' away—an' Dave, he went along, with an inside berth. Dunno how many he killed ov 'em first, but they scratched ther hut inter shoe-strings, an' didn't leave anythin' ov ther outfit big enuff ter swear to. Lucky fur me they went off up ther wind, an' didn't ketch a glimpse ov a small boy, standin' up on ther edge ov ther bluff. It war ther big pack, an' they cut a clear swath through everything eatable ez they went."

"And you were left alone?" asked one of the passengers, who, so far, had not yet addressed him.

"You bet."

"And what did you—what could you do?"

"Skated down to ther bay, got on board a whaler, and wasted about a year workin' my way back ter 'Frisco."

"You were content to stay a little nearer home after that, I suppose?" continued the same passenger.

"You bet I wasn't. Tried the 'Stralian diggin's a bit, an' washed fur diamonds back ov Natal. I war one uv an expedishun ez started ter explore ther Orinoko ter head-waters; an' it ain't so long sence I war chasin' cattle down in Patigony. Oh, I've had a shy at all that war in the ring."

"Found it all profitable, did you?" asked Mr. More, tapping his snuff-box by way of calling attention to himself and his question.

"Lots ov profit, but it didn't 'mount ter much. I kin git onto a good thing ez well ez ther next man, but somehow I allers lose ther lead afore I git a fair stoep. Er ther tunnel caves; er I break a leg. I've hed hard luck in my time; an' yit thar ain't many ez has struck it rich much oftener than Four Horse Frank. Why, right hyer, in this same country, me an' my pards hed ez good a thing ov it ez you'd want—only luck petered ez usu'l. Bless yer soul! when we hed 'bout a million in sight, ther top bu'sted, an' we all four ov us war dead an' buried afore you could say Jack Robinson."

"What? Dead and buried?"

"Dead and buried. I kin sw'ar to ther rest bein' dead; an' I know I war ther other thing."

"Four of you, eh? Um!"

Mr. More's snuff-box had disappeared. Now he looked very steadily at the late speaker.

"Perhaps I am mistaken, but, um, it seems to me I have heard—yes! Strange I didn't remember. You must be one of the old Four Horse Team that started the crack claim tunnel. Bad Luck Bar they called it then, eh? La Fatalidad?"

"That's about ther size ov it—but I don't jest see how you come ter drop to ther claim. You warn't thar, an' them ez war didn't hev much ter say about ther team afterwards. Old Red Sleeve made about as clean a wipe up ov that settlement ez you ever read of, jist ez ther roof went in; an' I war ther only one thet got out. I'll sw'ar, I didn't think thar war any one to kerry ther news."

"If they had not been so anxious to dig the team out perhaps old Manga Colorado wouldn't have had the chance to extinguish the settlement. Strange, very strange! Millions in that claim, and you went away and left it to the next prospector that came along."

"Jest so, jest so!" retorted Frank, not seeming to be troubled by the sarcasm that, to every one else, was patent in the voice of Mr. More.

"But when I crawled outen ther dirt thar wa'n't a livin' soul left whar Blue Blazes now stands, an' it wa'n't likely thar would be any settlers thar very soon. Not ter speak ov ther fact thet I war off my base a good ways, war cotched by ther red-skins, an' didn't git loose an' 'round ter gitting thar fur two year. By that time it war too late. I heerd that things hed bin lively, an' ov course some 'un hed jumped ther Crack Claim. It wa'n't no use ter go down."

"Ah—um! A great pity you were so unlucky. Colonel Wildmont will be a millionaire if I mistake not. As you abandoned the claim, of course nothing can be done now, or I might try to induce you to go into a little speculation."

"Tell me su'thin' I don't know," retorted Four Horse Frank, for the first time speaking a little sulkily.

"Ef ther 'riginal records wa'n't lost, maybe I'd try him a bitch fur it anyhow, jest fur fun; but I kin live without ther Crack Claim, an' I'm jest goin' down fur ther sake ov old times."

The young lady on the rear seat had shown no sign of being interested in the conversation, or even of being able to understand it. She looked vacantly out of the window from time to time, but for the most part leaned back in her seat, with her eyes closed and her hands folded in her lap.

Even when he was looking straight at her, and actually addressing his conversation to her, Four Horse Frank was not able to see that she was aware of his existence. And yet, as he closed, he saw her fingers moving covertly and quietly in her lap, and though some of the letters were upside down, so to speak, and all of them reasonably crooked, she spelled out in Spanish, "I must see you at Blue Blazes."

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN HOWL PAYS HIS RESPECTS.

THE outside passengers were a "mixed lot," the majority of them being of the rough-and-tumble class.

There was one exception, however.

Perched up on the seat by the side of Long Jim, as the gentleman who handled the ribbons was universally styled by his intimates, was a smooth-faced, rather slenderly-built youth of perhaps eighteen or twenty. Such would be the age one would be apt to name at a casual glance, and add a smile first, and a look of concern immediately afterward at the idea of such a very young gentleman going down to Blue Blazes to seek his fortune.

Long Jim was rough and bluff; but had a kind heart, after his way, besides being of a sociable turn of mind when the passenger who occupied the seat of honor beside him did not attempt to show too many airs and graces. He would hardly have chosen this young man for the position, but when he got there in some unobtrusive way, he made no objection, and even repressed the snort of disdain that he felt tempted to utter when he first saw the little dude.

The discreet silence of the first mile or two began to grow monotonous, and Jim's opinions were open to modification.

"Alone, youngster?" the driver asked, as he skillfully flected a fly off of his near wheeler.

"Up to the present time," cheerfully responded the "youngster."

"Mighty rough country, you've chosen to prowl around. If you ain't got friends in Blue Blazes I don't know what takes you thar, an' it won't take you long to be wishing you'd gone some other way."

The youngster laughed—a pleasant, boyish laugh.

"If I had gone some other way, it would have amounted to the same thing, and I would have missed riding down with Long Jim; a thing, they tell me, worth the cost of the journey when he's in a good humor. You're in a good humor now, aren't you?"

"Purty toller'ble; but I don't say what I'd be if I seen a young man putting on airs in front of his Uncle James. Mebbe you'd just as soon give us a handle, so, if you gits lost, we'll know what sort ter call yer. They check off my baggage to ther dot. When I can't answer they questions purty close."

"Oh, you're all right," laughed the lad. "I'm not subject to getting lost. The family only wishes I was; but I keep turning up, over and over again, like a bad quarter. The neighbors laugh and say, there's Maurice Montmorenci turned up again. Where was he this time? And, by the way, that's the handle you were looking for—Maurice Montmorenci, very much at your service. Have a weed?"

Long Jim silently took a cigar from the offered case, holding it unlit until the young man with the romantic name had deftly ignited a mate, and daintily smoked it for a minute or so.

Then he lighted his own weed from the offered cigar, and puffed away until a bad bit of road was passed, before he turned again to his newly made friend.

"Say, little one, you may be chaffin' me, but I'll take it as though you were giving it straight. I tell you honest; don't you do it."

"Don't do what?"

"Travel inter Blue Blazes under such a name as that. When they hear it the boys'll say, Shoot that name! And down around there they don't often say what they don't mean."

"But it's a nice name, a good name; and one I can't very well get rid of. What's the matter with it, anyhow?"

"Oh, it's a good name—in the wrong place. You take old Jim's advice. There's no one plays the game 'round thar, so call yerself Monte Mark, or somethin' that way. It's jest as good a name, and sounds a heap sight better."

"If you really think so, why, now, I wouldn't much mind trying it on. And if they want me to deal for them, why, don't you know? In a small way it wouldn't hurt much to accommodate them."

"Don't you do that either—don't you do that! They'd skin Faro Frank himself; an' once you git started what chance would you have?"

"Bad set are they? I'm afraid they wouldn't have such an easy thing of it as you seem to think, but who's who, and what sort of fellows hang out there?" It may be worth while to know a little about them. What's their vanity?"

The two had got along quite amicably so far; and they continued to do so. Long Jim gave a running history of Blue Blazes and its inhabitants; and Maurice Montmorenci laughingly but firmly refused to change his name for the worst of them. He seemed pretty much like a school-boy out for frolic, on ground the danger of which he did not know. As the hours passed on, and the rest of the passengers grew more solemn, his spirits seemed to rise. He laughed and whistled, made Long Jim laugh, and after keeping the passengers behind him interested by casual remarks addressed to them, managed to open a conversation with Four Horse Frank when that worthy stuck his head out from the

body of the coach to take a view of his surroundings.

Jim watched him through it all with a curious look—when he was not laughing or talking, or more particularly minding his horses.

"He's ez chipper a leetle banty rooster ez ever I set eyes on," he thought. "An' he's heeled, too, ez though he meant biz. Ef ther agents should try to hold us up this trip he'd jest be fresh enough to pull an' let go, makin' ov course, a nasty muss. Better give the kitten a warnin'. Thar's no tellin' where they may turn up fer the next ten miles."

The purpose of Long Jim was good enough, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, the leaders gave a shy.

There was nothing visible to show cause, but Jim knew that there must have been a reason; and so, having brought the team to place by a steady pull, and a sharp word or two, he looked back over his shoulder, curious to see what it was.

And at that moment there rung through the gorge into which they had descended the harsh order;

"Down brakes and up hands. Stir a peg and you're all dead mutton!"

Without intending it Jim had already checked the speed of his horses, so that it needed no application of the brakes to bring them to a stand-still. He just took another and a steadier pull, and the vehicle came to a halt, in the midst of a chorus of exclamations from the passengers.

Of course they knew what had happened, but they were none the less surprised.

"Now, keep your hands up, Long Jim, and you gentlemen on top. Don't you go to disremember that we've got you lined, and that we shoot first and talk afterwards, if any of the mules begin to kick. If anybody has anything to say, say it quick."

"Not a whimper, Captain Howl, not a whimper have we to remark. Jest hurry up ther biz. I want ter git in on schedule time, an' ez long as I kin do that everything will be all quite comfortable."

Long Jim had been held up before, and understood the situation. He spoke for himself of course; but at the same time he threw a warning glance over his shoulder, and thought it was at least good for all his outsiders. Every man of them had his arms at a perpendicular—And those of Maurice Montmorenci were straightest of all, while there was a curious look of dismay on his juvenile face.

"That's all right fer the outside; now, you folks on the inside, step down and out, holding your hands up where we can see them. Be quick about it! Jimmy's in a hurry, and so are we. If there's a living soul in that hearse in a minute by the watch, we'll turn a stream on and begin to pump lead. There's a dozen of us in this thing, and if we once let go, there'll be just nothing left of coach, fares or driver."

A little high-pitched was the voice of the outlaw, but sharp and stern, moreover, as though he meant every word he said. He had hardly finished speaking, when the door of the coach flew open, and the procession began, with John More at the head.

"We understand the situation exactly," was his hasty remark as he touched the ground.

"Don't shoot, if you please. There is a lady in the outfit, and we would certainly prefer giving up any little wealth we may have about us to endangering her life. I assure you, my stock of coin is very slender. Ah, um!"

"Stand back a little further, then, and we'll talk about that a little more when we come to taking up the collection. That's right, there. Come with a roll. A little more to the right, if you please, so we can keep an eye on the line."

One after another they filed out until last of all the Mexican lady took her place with the rest.

"Come, hurry up there, you other man inside, or there won't be enough left for the jury to sit on. Keep an eye on the line, half a dozen of you, and if a soul tries to bolt or break, plug him. The balance of you might as well begin practicing on the hearse. We use extra long cartridges, and the balls will come out on the other side."

"Pardon me, my friend," interposed Mr. More, "but you are in a fair way to waste good lead and powder. I assure you, on the honor of a gentleman, ah, um! There is no one else inside."

"Why, you hoary-headed old liar! Are you his side pard? You can't play that game on us."

"It is no game at all. I merely wished to save time and trouble."

"If he moves, drill him—or if his pard begins to shoot. We'll have him out or break a leg."

The meaning of the road-agent was sufficiently plain. A couple of revolvers looked threateningly in the direction of John More, while three or four of the bandits dashed recklessly at the coach.

There was something like a shout of surprise from their leader. The inside of the coach was empty.

"Here, you!" grated Captain Howl, his tones more savage than ever.

"Four Horse Frank was in that hearse when

it left the Bar, and we've had an eye on it ever since. Where is he now? Talk straight, or croak quick."

"As I observed, ah, um! He is not there now. The coach gave a lurch a short distance back, and he fell or sprang through the window. A prudent man is Mr. Four Horse Frank, a very prudent man. Probably he has started for Blue Blazes on foot, and by this time is half way there."

A snorting curse burst from the lips of Captain Howl. His pistol-hand went up, and for just an instant John More's life was in danger.

Then he turned away.

"One, two, and three, back! If this is so, the infernal idiots were too blind to see him, and he's dropped into the brush somewhere. Roust him out and shoot when you see him. Forward!"

Three men dashed back on the trail; and the captain again turned his attention to the passengers in hand.

"Shell out, gentlemen, as the treasurer passes along the line; the rest of you keeping your hands well up. If the offering looks suspiciously small, we'll look hard for the balance. You!"

He poised his pistol at Mr. More, who stood at the head of the line.

"As I said before, my offering is small. Ah, um! If I had had more to bring, I would not have brought it. Too old a bird to leave many feathers in such a trap."

As More spoke he handed over a pocket-book that did not seem to be altogether empty, and then commenced to gather up a handful of change in his pantaloons pocket.

"Keep your small change, curse you! Do you think we are such an infernal set of skinflints? The public must be allowed to live or where would we come in at? Put your hands up again, and stand at ease. Next! Come to the rack!"

And so, down the line he went, each passenger handing over his pocketbook, purse or wallet, except Marquita Garcia, to whom no word was spoken.

Then a couple of the outlaws, at a brief order, searched the inside of the coach thoroughly. Altogether they spoiled their victims of quite a nice little sum, and though the captain occasionally cast a somewhat anxious glance to the rear, and listened intently, he seemed fairly well satisfied with the plunder in hand.

"You can crawl back now; and you don't want to make any mistakes. Captain Howl is sweet as candy when you treat him right; but he's awful wicked when you try him one below the belt. We don't trouble outsiders when their friends below are equal to the occasion. Ah—a moment, miss! The rest are now at liberty to pursue their journey; but, really, we couldn't part so soon with you. Touch them up, Jimmy. We will take care of the lady."

Marquita Garcia gave a little cry as the hand of Captain Howl fell somewhat heavily upon her shoulder. The door of the stage was already banged to, and Long Jim was gathering up the lines, preparatory to resuming his journey.

Jim had only heard the order to himself; the reference to Marquita had been spoken in a lower tone, and he had no desire to be obtrusively curious with his glances. He shook the reins, spoke softly to his horses, and the coach rolled on, half a dozen of the outlaws covering it with their carbines, ready to riddle it at a word from their captain, or an offensive sign from the vehicle. Marquita seemed lost.

Then came an interruption, as sudden as it was unexpected. From the rocks above, on the opposite side of the road, came a pistol-shot, and, as Captain Howl threw up his hands and staggered back, Four Horse Frank shouted:

"Jump, gall! Fur yer life, jump!"

His voice was almost lost in the noise of the rattling fire of the outlaws. They had seen a flash, and though Frank himself was invisible by the time their attention was attracted thither they fired in that direction without taking a thought of the receding stage, or the girl captive.

Marquita saw her one chance and seized it promptly. As the hands of the outlaw dropped away from her, she sprang forward, and ran toward the coach, fleetly as a deer. In an instant she was behind it, had caught at the straps on the boot, swung herself clear of the ground, climbed to the top, and, bounding through the cowering, upper-deck passengers, dropped down in front of Long Jim and Maurice Montmorenci, as Captain Howl, recovering from the shock, shouted:

"Halt, there, or die!"

What Jim might have done if left to his own devices, is not so easy to say. He had the spot to pass every day, and if he did not hold up today it was understood the agents would drop him to-morrow.

It was Maurice Montmorenci that solved the question for him. With the ease of an expert he snatched the whip and brought it down in one snaky, stinging cut, that seemed to cover every horse in the team, and made them plunge madly forward.

Yet Howl's order had been no empty threat. He was all himself once more, and his hand held a pistol with all its old-time nerve. It raised,

held steady just long enough to cover Long Jim's head, and then the trigger was pulled.

At the report Jim sprang convulsively up, dropped the lines, half caught at the side of the seat, and pitched heavily to the ground.

Captain Howl knew what he was about when he selected his place for an ambushade; and when he dropped the driver it was part of the same plan.

Just ahead there was a sharp bend in the trail, that gave scant chance for a coach to turn at speed, even with a gilt-edge driver. With no driver at all it was ninety to one the stage would come to wreck. To make it a sure thing he had a man ambushed just beyond the turn, to shoot a wheeler when the situation demanded.

There was a chorus of contradictory yells from within; and on top the men crouched lower than ever, and gave themselves over for lost.

Only Maurice Montmorenci had his wits about him, and was ready for the emergency.

As the lines dropped from Long Jim's hands he snatched at them; gathered them in, none too soon; threw all his strength into a long, steady pull to the left; and then as they swirled around the curve at racing speed, shook a derringer out of his sleeve and took a snap-shot at a masked man who had raised from his lair, and stood with his carbine ready for a wheeler as they passed him.

The man dropped; the stage swept by; and, for the moment, the bloody work was over.

CHAPTER IV.

HIS NAME ON THE BOOK.

"HERE! one of you fellows take hold of these prancing chargers. If they haven't pulled my arms off it's because they must be put on with gum elastic, and able to stretch a little."

For a mile the stage had rolled on, its pace only gradually slackening. Since the escape had been made no one seemed anxious to interfere; as far as possible every one was looking anxiously to the rear. When Maurice threw the brake down, and brought his teams to a standstill by a harder pull than ever, there was a chorus, outside and in.

"Go on!"

"What's the matter?"

"Poor Jim!"

"What in blazes yer stoppin' fur?"

"What yer goin' ter do?"

The youngster coolly twisted the lines around the brake bar and sprung to the ground. He even recharged his derringer before answering; and quietly examined the revolver in his belt. After listening to see if the air carried any sounds of pursuit, and taking a long glance up the road, he answered:

"If that team gets away with you I wouldn't be a bit surprised, since none of you will take hold of the ribbons. But if you men, are white you'll hold them there while I go back a piece on the trail. I want to see what's become of my friend, Long Jim."

The stage opened, and Mr. John More sprung out.

"I am not as young as I once was, but, ah, um, I wish to see the whole of this. I will go along. If the agents have not followed it is because they have gone the other way. If nothing else we may bring off the body of the driver."

"In the language of the immortal, 'Barkis is willin'.' Come on!"

And then, in a lower tone:

"You'll stand a mighty good chance to foot it all the way to Blue Blazes. If there's a man there that thinks he can handle four horses he'll make an effort to tool the old hearse into town. It's the easiest satisfied crowd, with the least sand in their craws, that ever I saw."

"Ah, um! I am willing to take my chances of that if you are. You, there! It's safe enough as long as you hear no firearms. If shooting begins, and you see nothing of us, take up the reins and follow the trail like fury."

He spoke to one of the passengers, who was edging toward the lines in a half-hearted way, evidently not entirely convinced that he was the man for the occasion. After that, he followed the youngster up the road. At the distance of a hundred yards or so he gave a backward glance, and saw the stage standing as they had left it.

There was a possibility of approaching the scene of the late disturbance under cover, and the two silently took advantage of it.

"Ah, um!" whispered More, at length. "As I suspected, the rascals have evacuated. Either they have followed our gasconading friend, or for some reason they have beaten a retreat. Poor fellow!"

The latter exclamation was caused by seeing the body of Long Jim lying pretty much as it had fallen. If the driver was still breathing he made no sign.

It might be possible that some of the outlaws were still in ambush, and the two approached with care, all the time keeping a wary watch around.

Nothing to alarm could be seen, and finally they bent over the body.

"I felt it in my bones!" exclaimed Maurice, as the supposed corpse stirred slightly, and uttered a low moan.

"Hard hit, but not dead. I've seen an Indian

squaw crawl off with two such wounds—down at Chiriqui," muttered More. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Tie him up and tote him along to ther hearse," answered the voice of Four Horse Frank, at his shoulder.

"He looks tough as nails, an' I'll bet a horse he's hard ter kill. Let me look at him. I know a hole when I see it; an' if we kin find whar he's plugged mebbe we can save his bacon."

"It's right through the breast," interposed the youngster. "It's a miracle that he is living; and if we move him I am afraid he will die."

"Oh, yer 'way off! It's only a rib bu'sted all ter thunder, but nothin' wrong inside. He'll faint ag'in when we move him, but we can't help that. He ain't bleedin' to speak of. Say, youngster! You've got sand—dead loads. Ef you didn't kerry quite sich a heavy harness I'd swar you war a pard ter tie to. It's a shame fur sich a nerry leetle cuss ez you be ter hev ter go inter Blue Blazes with sich a load on. Yer ain't givin' yerself a chance with ther boys."

While he spoke Frank was attending to the wounded man, and, as he never looked up from his occupation, Maurice Montmorenci simply shrugged his shoulders and gave no answer.

Probably Frank expected none, for, after a pause, while he examined his work, he continued:

"Jim ain't exactly a feather weight, but I reckon, More, that you an' me kin kerry him. Give us yer hands an' we'll make a cheer. That's ther ticket! I'll do ther work ef you'll only try yer best ter hold yer end level."

Between them they carried the almost insensible man, and finally placed him in the stage—John More and another passenger moving to the upper deck, while Four Horse Frank assumed the ribbons.

"It's a mighty poor way ter load a hearse—gittin' most ov ther load on top—but it's ther best we kin do. Yip, galang!"

No professional stage-driver could have taken to the work more readily.

It was no particularly strange thing for the stage to be late; and as they rattled on at a great rate they made up a good part of the time that had been lost.

Still, it was after dark when they rolled into Blue Blazes, and drew up with a flourish in front of the Grand Occidental.

The passengers dismounted. Long Jim, who, by this time, had rallied from the shock of his wound, was helped out; and Jefferson Scrabble, the proprietor of the establishment, gallantly escorted the lady passenger into the house, while assuring the rest of the cargo that they were just in time, and supper was on the table.

The toilettes of everybody were hastily made, and then Jefferson had a chance to sigh over the rapidity with which the substantial of life disappeared from the face of his table.

One by one the passengers dropped off, until last of all Four Horse Frank left the table, having, as he averred, eaten through the whole way-bill. He picked his teeth good-naturedly, and strolled away until he almost ran against Scrabble, standing at the front door, in the attitude of a listener.

"A mighty slim turn-out ov loafers fer a town like this. Kinder slow, isn't it? Whar's yer regulars?"

Jefferson, in a few words, explained that everybody who liked a free show was down at the Spotted Dog Saloon. There was music there, and probably by this time some dancing, as three strolling musicians had made their appearance a short time before.

"Music! You bet there's music in ther air! I hear ther orchestra a-tunin' up now. Strike me blind ef it don't seem ter me ez though I war 'way back East. Take keer ov Jimmy, an' save me a good bed. I'll be 'round ag'in later on. It's a chance ter see Blue Blazes in her hours ov pleasure that, you bet, I ain't goin' ter lose. So-long!"

And Frank darted off in the direction of the Spotted Dog, where he heard the fusillade going on that immediately preceded the extinguishing of the lights.

The noise ceased before he reached the saloon; and just as he was about to enter the door, the lights flared up as brightly as ever. Then came a burst of laughter that fairly shook the house.

When the room was reilluminated, it was found that the musicians had taken advantage of the darkness to disappear. Roaring Rob was sitting in a chair in one corner of the room, calmly smoking a pipe, while the marshal was looking around anxiously in search of Gerald Sinclair, who, in some way, had managed to vanish.

At first it was thought that he had slipped out with the Italians—and no one was surprised, either. When, after a moment's comparative silence, he was discovered on his hands and knees, slowly backing out from under a table, the laugh began.

Sinclair cautiously resumed the perpendicular, but held his head and shoulders as though he was prepared to duck at short notice. As everybody was looking his way the laugh seemed to scare him rather more than the shooting had

done. He glared around until his eyes fell upon Belshazzar Brick. Toward him he skurried, seizing him by the arm.

"Your word, sir-ab, your pledged word! I've done nothing at all—nothing at all—yet they seem bent on extermination. Escort me to the Grand Occidental, and if money is an object, I will give you, sir-ab, a—a—dollar."

"Take him along, Belshazzar, take him along!" chorused the boys.

"It's jest leadin' us inter temptation to have stock like him iyin' 'round loose."

"Yer knows they will hev an inquest, an', really, ther town can't afford it. Why, you leave him hyer an' he'd jest turn his toes up out ov spite. You know what a expense that Englishman was that came down from Ground Hog an' put on airs an' a b'iled shirt?"

"Thar, thar, boys! Don't be too hard on ther critter," answered Brick, with a wave of his hand.

"Blue Blazes ain't ther kind ter go back on a pore, crazy critter like him. A gang ov Digger Injuns wouldn't do that. I'll jest move him 'round ter whar he won't be so apt ter git in a tangle an' then I'll come 'round ter see ef it's all straight. Ef Rob ain't 'shamed ov hisself he orter be, an' that's ez good ez we kin ask. Come along, young man. Ef I hadn't known yer father I'm blessed ef I wouldn't have let 'em at yer."

Belshazzar had already turned toward the door, so that he had no opportunity to see the surprise that for just an instant was visible in the face of the young man, who looked on the eve of making an exclamation. His mind changed again, as suddenly, for he followed Brick out without a word, linking his arm into that of the marshal as they passed the door.

"Ther fact are, young man, you've come to ther wrong town ter put on frills; an' ef you're ther son ov yer father that's another reason why ther sooner yer gits out ov Blue Blazes ther better."

"Really, sir-ab, you astonish me," murmured Sinclair. "My father, eh! Certainly you never met him. If so—well—thanks! But where did you have the pleasure of seeing him?"

"Never mind. I've give you fair warning ez a private citizen, an' ez Bailiff ov Blue Blazes. You kin take it er leave it—I'm not wastin' more breath; an' mebbe I wouldn't hev done that much ef it hadn't bin fur that pointer you give me on Four Horse Frank. I'm goin' fur him in ther mornin', an' if I strike his trail ag'in you bet this time I'll run him down. He hedn't no mercy on me; an', I tell yer, I'll hev none on him. It ain't no rifle, ner yet sixes he hez ter end his life in front ov. It's ther ropel ther ropel cuss him!"

Belshazzar was talking to himself and gesticulating wildly, shaking his clinched fist, as though threatening the stars.

"Amen! Cuss him!" whispered Gerald Sinclair, "but for what, sir-ab? I do not think I ever was made aware of the exact reason of your intense dislike to that individual."

"Fur murder, cuss him! Ther foulest, nastiest, dirtiest murder on record. I knowed it all ther time, but I never sed a word. Wasn't he my pard? An' wouldn't I die, right thar in my tracks, fur ther man I ever called that?"

"Of course, sir-ab," responded Gerald, as he felt the grip on his arm tighten.

"An' then, when he knowed I knowed it, an' hed bin keepin' quiet fur all that time, ter turn 'round an' try ter murder me! He's a devil! a devil with a club, thet strikes in ther darkness. But, hush! I'll have him yit. An' then—no mercy."

Just then Belshazzar Brick was not a very cheerful acquaintance to stroll with, by the light of the full moon, though his companion seemed to view his antics more calmly than he had done those of the men they had left behind them. But, he was more accustomed to the ways of a madman than Belshazzar could have supposed, and neither shrunk nor appeared alarmed. Another might have had the wits driven out of him in turn.

"You think you can prove it do you? I tell you, sir-ab, after the lapse of years such things are hard to reopen again. Anything will hang a man when he's innocent; but if he's guilty—you see sir-ab, it's just as well not to monkey with the ax."

The spasm of indignation was already over, and the marshal's face and tone changed as if by magic.

"Never you mind, young man, I've said too much a'ready; an' I ain't goin' ter skeer away my game, nobow. Consider them words ez warnin' an' let ther bull thing drop. Hyer's ther Grand Occidental."

Together the two men entered the office, very much as though Gerald was a prisoner, held in durance, and they were greeted with something like a subdued laugh.

"Just the man we want to see. Look hyer, Belshazzar! He's come at last. Just run your eyes over this. 'Four Horse Frank Tucson,' and don't you ferget it. Was here just a moment ago, and went down to the Spotted Dog. Wonder you didn't meet him on the way."

Brick looked at the sprawling signature in the register.

"It's him, at last; an' I'll have him, dead or alive! Alive fur choice; though he's got ter come, ef it's only fur cold meat. Hallelujah!"

And out into the night rushed the marshal in hot haste to retrace his steps, and reach the saloon he had so lately left.

CHAPTER V.

THE SPOTTED DOGS GO HUNTING—AND BELSHAZZAR NAILS HIS MAN.

THE departure of the marshal with Gerald Sinclair under his protective wing left the congregation at the Spotted Dog free for a time to follow their own devices.

Every one, unless, perhaps, it was Roaring Rob, seemed to be in a festive humor; and it took some little time to cease laughing and jesting about the appearance of the young man as he crawled out from under the table. Everything might have gone along quietly enough if Roaring Rob had not called attention to himself by asking where in thunder the musicians had skipped to, and how they went?

"You're a nice man to come asking, after you bu'sted the whole lay-out by your dog-fool nonsense!" retorted Johnny Wardle. "Blame my cats if I were you I'd crawl into a hole, and pull the hole along in after me."

"What's got in your wool? Didn't I put up my money along with ther rest; five good dollars fur every one that ary other galoot chipped? Ef it takes more ter pay ther damages jest name ther pile an' you'll see me go down inter my buckskin an' fish it out. But don't be chinnin' yer uncle Abraham unless yer mean somethin'. I ain't ther kind ter take it."

"But, see hyer, Bob," put in another sport, before Wardle had time to answer, "you jest spoiled ther sport an' no mistake. By this time we'd all be shakin' our tootsy-wootsies, an' havin' a bang-up time. You knows when thar's music to ther front that Johnny jest cl'ars ther deck an' lets her went regardless?"

"Fetch yer music back ag'in, then, you've hed yer extry laugh at ther dood, an' now you kin sottle down to ther evenin's amusement, an' Roarin' Rob'll jest go 'way an' leave yer to yer foolishness. But don't crowd me, ef yer want ter be able ter enjoy ther picnic."

"But they've all gone down ter Red Hank's 'Lair,' ter fiddle fur ther kid-glove sports thet airs themselves in that sweet-scented tiger-trap. Mebbe they won't rake in ther rocks like at ther Spotted Dog; but there it's high-toned, don't yer see, an you bet they won't hev no sich ructions ez skeered 'em out hyer."

"Won't they? Well, now, you jest bet. Hyar, boyees! We're wantin' the wuth ov our money, ain't we? Who's game ter go 'long to ther Lair an' roust 'em out? We'll bring 'em back a-whoopin', an' make a full night ov it."

The proposition was a reckless one, sure enough; and everybody knew it was no children's frolic that Rob was speaking of.

Red Hank's "Lair" was the jungle, where lurked the deadliest "tiger" in the town, and the men who frequented it were for the most part of the kind that are wicked and quiet. Some of the prominent citizens of Blue Blazes, like Colonel Wildmont, made it their headquarters when they were inclined for a night out; but there were other men to be found there, soft spoken, noiseless men, who knew more about pistols and cards than they did about loud talk and heavy drinking. Not at all the kind that frequented the Spotted Dog; and between the patrons of the two saloons there was no very cordial feeling, though so far there had been no expression of open hostility.

The proposition of Roaring Rob was one that, in cold blood, might have caused some debate. If it ended in any thing tangible it would probably be a fight, and when the sports of the Lair did fight there was not much fun about it.

On the other hand there was a chance that there would be a square back-down—which would be worth a million—or a victory, which would decide who were the bosses of the town.

There was a moment of silence; then the proposal was greeted with a yell of delight. A dozen men sprung forward, perfectly willing to forgive Rob for having broken up the concert in the prospect of the amusement to be had during the intermission.

"Jest count ther bull crowd in, Rob! You lead out, an' we'll keep close behind yer. Git out quick, afore Belshazzar comes around."

"An' kin yer take in a stranger to ther camp, what's willin' ter put in some good licks, jest fur ther fun? You'll find me an' all-fired good man ter have in the crowd ef I'm welcome; an' ef I ain't, jest say ther word an' I'll git round ter put in a leetle work on the other side. I must have fun when thar's any going."

Four Horse Frank's application for enlistment was hailed with a shout, and no questions.

"Come along, stranger. You may as well be on the right side, and you'll have a heap good chance to see how Blue Blazes works. It won't take five minutes at the Lair to make you feel as though you'd always lived here, and from your looks, in that time, the boys will be ready to swear you have."

"Size me up then, an' hyar goes. I've got

you all down fine. I don't want ary mistakes. Whoop! Sail in!"

In rather a disorderly gang they all started for the Lair, Johnny Wardle throwing after them the interested advice to, "Look a leetle out."

Red Hank's place was, both inside and out, more pretentious than the Spotted Dog, and to-night it was all ablaze, with light, mirth and music enough to make the soul glad. If any of Wardle's pets had a secret hope that the musicians were not there, they were doomed to disappointment, since hardly had they got into the night air when they heard the harp and violin quite plainly, and without effort could locate them at the Lair.

No hesitation was there. Arm in arm, Roaring Rob and Four Horse Frank led the way, and the little army from the Spotted Dog filed into the Lair, and ranged themselves in front of the bar.

"All hands up to saturate!" said Rob, looking over the house.

"It ain't often we kin afford ter h'iste ther high-toned benzine they sling out hyer, but when we do, we ask 'em all up, regardless. Hank, sling out ther best yer got in ther hull rack!"

He spoke loud enough for everybody near to hear; and as there was a pause in the music just then, and a good many were moving up toward the bar, there were not many that did not hear him. The remarkable thing that followed was, that the movement toward the bar stopped, and the crowd that had been in the room stared at the new-comers in a way that was by no means friendly.

"Don't put on too many frills here, Robert," remarked Hank, coldly.

"There's a dozen in your gang, or thereabouts, and there's just about glasses enough to go around. Take your drinks without quite so much noise, and the balance will come up to suit themselves."

Hank himself happened to be behind the bar, and he did not seem a bit alarmed over this incursion of bad men from below. He strung out his tumblers, after counting the party with provoking slowness; and then set down a decanter with that half-meditative look that tumbler-jugglers are wont to assume when they have a doubt in regard to the solvency of a would-be customer.

"Be you a-doin' bizness hyer, er ain't yer?" Four Horse Frank came to the front, and if he was not fighting mad he put on a very good imitation of that unamiable condition.

"I reckon my friend, hyer, are a free-born American, an' somewhat about half-white. Ef he don't want ter drink alone let ther gents speak fur 'emselves; it ain't your put-in, ez long ez our money kin talk ez fast ez we kin."

"Oh, put a button on! This ain't the Spotted Dog, and the gentlemen that patronize this establishment are not generally deaf. It's the rule of the house, and those that don't like it can stay out. Fill yourself as full as a goat, but don't trouble strangers. Your glass is waiting."

A warning gripe on Frank's shoulder checked his answer, while Rob spoke up:

"You're doin' it fu'st-rate, Hank, but that ain't what we come in fur. Them gerloots ez yer hev thar, a-shakin' music fur ther Lair, are our mutton. We hed 'em a-goin' down at ther Spotted Dog, an' after we hed passed 'round ther hat, an' all chipped in heavy, dog-rot 'em, ef they didn't skip, an' never give us ther wuth ov our money. We're jest goin' ter lead 'em to Johnny's, git ther wuth ov our money, an' then you kin have 'em. Lead 'em out, boys! Thar ain't time fur foolin'."

The drinks had been disposed of, in spite of the surly manner in which Hank had set them out, and Rob returned to business without delay. At his order three of the men from the Spotted Dog sprung for the musicians, who were occupying a post of honor in the corner at the end of the bar.

The two Italians had been watching the party from the time it entered. The girl was no longer with them; and the men evidently wished they were somewhere else. Unfortunately there was no line of retreat open, and the only thing they could do was to wait and see what the result was going to be.

When one of Roaring Rob's men caught the elder musician by the shoulder the frightened fellow made no attempt at resistance, but covered over his instrument in a protecting way. His own fate hardly seemed of much account; but his harp might be broken, and it would cost money to replace that.

"Come along, you sinful old fraud!" shouted Dandy Webb, who had hold of him; "we're wanting you back at the Spotted Dog; and we're wanting you bad. Did you think we put up that big ante all 'round fur you to skip with down to the Lair? It's wussner boss-stealin', sich ungratytood. Limber up, now, an' come along afore ther fur begins ter fly."

"I doanno watta mean," moaned the Italian. "Angelo no skippa. Worka all donna at Spotted Dog. Walk away."

"You bet the work was all done—for you. Why, blame you, you got a whole pocketsful of

the filthy lucre there, enough ter keep ther fiddlin' an' ther harpin a-goin' all night. That war the time yer thought yer had us done."

"Hold on!"

Red Hank had not been in a very amiable mood all evening, and when Roaring Rob's contingent entered he didn't care much if they came for conquest. He felt a little more than half-inclined for a ruction anyhow; and he had already given an opening for Rob to begin his work. But Rob was too much of a general to commence an attack on Hank himself, and in his own house, though he saw, from the humor of the proprietor, that if they wanted to take the Italians back to the Spotted Dog, it would be after a fight for them.

For that reason he quieted his strangle ally, and sent his men after the musicians, while he himself explained their intentions, and watched Hank as he spoke, with a glance he thought to be keen enough to read what was coming.

All the same he was disappointed.

When Hank did move it was like lightning; and this time he was in dead earnest.

How or when the motion was made Roaring Rob was unable to say; but hardly had he finished speaking when Hank was handling a brace of revolvers. One six covered the man who held Angelo, while the other lay straight for himself; and he saw the hammers of both gently rising at an easy touch on the triggers. They were self-cockers; and as he had not made any motion at all toward his own weapons it was not hard to guess how the chances stood.

And once with the drop in that shape Red Hank's voice rung through the house.

"Hold on! I don't want to have to tell you to hold your hands up, it strikes me you ought to see your line of duty without it. You men have come in here for a circus; and I don't intend it shall be much of a show, if I have to shoot two or three to stop the performance. You there, Dandy Webb, drop that Italian, and all of you file out! This is my house, and when men won't keep the peace in it they have to leave it. That's the law of Blue Blazes, and the gospel of Red Hank. One minute by the clock to get out in the dark, and if you ain't satisfied then, and gone, I'll begin to shoot. If you ain't sure what that means go up and visit the graveyard. I tell you—there won't be any fighting here, but just wholesale slaughter."

"And what will I be doin'?"

Four Horse Frank rapped sharply on the end of the bar with the muzzle of the derringer in his right hand, but he kept it held low down, and in perfect line for Hank's heart. He talked as easy as though his feathers had not been ruffled a little while before, and there was a smile around his handsome lips just genial enough to be dangerous.

Hank could not keep his eyes everywhere at once, and Frank had stolen a march on him.

The worst of it was that the stranger stood in the one place where he could not be reached by any of the regular patrons of the Lair. He was partially screened by a large post; and in addition the men from the Spotted Dog were all grouped so that not one of Hank's friends could draw a bead on him.

Four Horse Frank's question was better than a threat. It fell so gently on the ear that it evidently meant something, and Hank forgot, at once, to look at the clock to see how fast the minute of grace was expiring.

"No; don't yer try it," continued the stranger sport, after an instant of silence.

"You can't change yer aim an' git in on me afore I kin pull trigger; an' it does sling an awful chunk. Knuckle, Hank, knuckle! I've got yer foul. You pick trigger an' I'll blow yer cold. Git off ther roof, er I'll heave a brick."

"Yes, Hank, thar's a heap ov sense in the yarn he's chinnin'—an' I tell yer, he's a holy terror onther shoot. But ye'r dead wrong in what ye'r sayin'. We wouldn't tear things at the Lair—not fur a heap sight bigger pile than any galoot would give to see it done. But them Italians played us dirt, an' we want ter bring 'em up to ther rack. They left 'bout givin' us one chune after they got our money, an' ther boys picked us out fur a committee ter find 'em. All we're askin' is fur you ter lend 'em to us long ernuf ter hev jest one fur a wind-up, an' then you kin have 'em. It's ther shortest way out ov this hyer hole; an' we'd better all bend a leetle then somebuddy go bu'st. Cain't you fellows go 'long down?"

A sudden change came over Hank's face—a change that was an unaccountable puzzle to Roaring Rob, who knew the man. He did not see a signal given by a gentleman who had just entered, nor, if he had done so, would the mystery have been plainer. Though the new-comer was no stranger, Colonel Wildmont was not unknown to any man who had lived a week in Blue Blazes.

Still Hank did not altogether back down.

"Call it off, Rob, call it off! I can't let you run the Lair; but if things stand as you say I'll make a fair divvy with you. They haven't been around the house here, at all, yet, but we're just about tired of them anyhow. Let them hand the hat and and play a grand finale. Then you can have them; and much good may they do."

"Can't do it, Hank. When ther boys at ther Spotted Dog want a thing they want it bad. Ef we don't start soon they'll be down hyer a-b'ilin', an' we'll all be erlected fur a a sloppy time."

"And I want you ter notice thet I kin hold ther drop tell ther cow's tails drop off. Ef you shoot I pull; an' I'm certain death."

Four Horse Frank added his little song after the manner of a chorus.

"And who in thunder are you?" asked Hank, trying to bring the stranger also into his range of vision. "I don't remember ever seeing you before, and here you are trying to run the town. What is the name of this mighty chief?"

"Four Horse Frank, my gentle gazelle, an' I'm a chief from 'way back, don't you disremember."

"Then," interposed a new voice in the discussion, "I take you in fur ther murder ov Jean Janvrin. Ye'r' wuth twenty thousand dollars in good gold. I've bin waitin' fur you a long time, but you've got hyer at last."

It was the voice of Belshazzar Brick, the Bailiff of Blue Blazes. He had worked his way through the crowd in a quiet, steady manner, until he stood just at the shoulder of Frank. As he spoke, he seized a wrist in either hand, forcing them up and back till the handcuffs he carried closed with a click.

And, at the same time, there was a cry and a crash. Dandy Webb had seen that Hank's eyes were elsewhere at last, and had taken his chance. He caught Angelo, shook him loose from his harp, and with a mighty effort, sprung through a convenient window, taking glass, sash and all with him.

CHAPTER VI.

AFTER THE FRYING-PAN COMES THE FIRE.

THE one thing that saved the Lair from being the scene of the wildest confusion, was the prompt action of Colonel Wildmont.

"Steady, gentlemen!" he said, in his sharp, quick way, as he stepped forward.

"We all decided, not very long ago, that Blue Blazes should turn over a new leaf and be a law-abiding camp; and you put the law and its administration pretty much all in the hands of Mr. Brick and myself. Please remain as you are until there is some evidence that we are wrong. Those that are on the side of law and order put themselves beside me."

With complete unanimity, the party of the Lair answered to the appeal. As for the men of the Spotted Dog, they had no desire to follow Dandy Webb. He was putting a feather in their caps by the abduction of Angelo; and meantime there was a wonderful amount of interest in this arrest that Belshazzar had just made.

The stranger had flung himself into their set without any introduction, and they were too full of the frolic ahead to think of asking his name. When, in answer to Hank's challenge, he had declared himself Four Horse Frank, there was a sensation; and when Belshazzar Brick got his man at last, in spite of the fact that he was taking him out of their ranks, there was a momentary impulse to give three cheers.

Twenty thousand dollars, too! If that was a fact, Belshazzar had been playing his game very neatly. Every man of them had believed that if there was such a man, Brick wanted him to pay him back for some personal injury. Why, if they had only known the truth, there were half a dozen men who would have taken their chances very cheerfully and arrested two or three men for twenty thousand dollars. They wondered, too, how Brick had got on the trail so quickly; or whether it was only a lucky chance that brought him there just in the nick of time to hear the sport's declaration. The fact that he was registered at the Grand Occidental was, as yet, unknown to them.

Belshazzar, in spite of his triumph, was as cool as an iceberg.

"Thar won't be any foolishness, Kunnel Wildmont. The boys know I never ask more ner the squa' thing, an' they all know I've been after this man fur years. He's a stranger to them; but I know him of old, and they'll take my word fur it that he's a low down thief, that killed a man fur fifty dollars, back East, an' robbed, er tried to rob his pards out West. It ain't ther twenty thousand so much, boys—though in course I'm takin' that all in—ez ter git even. Thar wa'n't one of you thet didn't know he war my meat ther minnit he slung out his handle."

"You sure of your man, Belshazzar? There's no question about your running him in for disturbing the peace; but you ought to be very certain before bringing a charge of so serious a nature."

"Sure! Why I knowed him ther minnit I put eyes on him, an' he never said a word yit. I've hed his 'scription down very fine, an' he answers up ter every pint. Jest keep a watch on him thet he don't make a break, an' I'll read off his pedigree. Ef he don't fill the bill I'll turn him loose an' let him kick me ter death. You kin smile; but it's awful cold in ther evening when Belshazzar Brick gits left."

The surprise had been so complete, the movement of the marshal so powerful, that Four Horse Frank had neither chance nor inclination for resistance until the fetters had locked. After

that, he stood, the most unconcerned of any in the room. At this direct address the smile partly left his face. He turned to the crowd and spoke with an earnestness that he had not previously shown.

"Gents, I'm askin' nothin' ov ther gang at ther Lair, an' I don't want much from ther crowd I've bin trainin' with. I ain't splurgin', ner am I even wantin' ter make a decent-sized, old-fashioned kick. All I want ter know are, ef this man runs Blue Blazes; an' ef I go peaceable inter ther caboose, ef he'll ever let me come out alive. Give me fair play, an' I ain't ashamed ov my name er record. He's 'way off; but I ain't kickin' tell ther time comes. I'd ez soon sleep in ther lockup ez risk a bed at ther Grand Occidental."

"This man runs Blue Blazes," answered Wildmont, before Belshazzar could get in a word; "and he has the whole town behind him. If you had known how familiar we all are with your name, through our worthy marshal, I think you would have been less free to announce it."

Somewhat sulkily, as it seemed, Frank answered:

"It's a good name, ther best I hev, an' ez fur ez I know thar's nothin' ag'in' it ter hang a man fur."

"Jest stop right thar!" interrupted Brick. "Thar's a heap ag'in' it. Let me run over ther p'int, though I know 'em purty well by heart. Ef you don't b'lieve me, kunnel, listen hyer."

Deliberately Belshazzar opened his coat, and reaching in the bosom of his vest, drew out an ancient, well-worn pocketbook. This he opened carefully, and extracted a folded paper, that seemed in the last stages of dilapidation, through much handling.

"Mind yer, me an' him hez a private 'count ter settle; but, that goes over. Ef he cl'ars up this leetle matter, mine comes afterwards. Mebbe, though, you'd better read it right out. It'll sound stronger like, than ef I did, an' I've kept it quiet so long, waitin' fur my chance that I want ter hear how it sounds. Take it keerful, now. It's 'most ready ter fall in pieces."

Very gingerly the bailiff opened out the paper, and handed it to the alcalde, who laid it on the bar, and slowly—now and then pushing in place with his finger a frayed segment—read aloud:

"TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD.

"The above reward will be paid, upon conviction, for the arrest of the man who killed Jean Janvrin, Sept. 21 * * * * is accused of the crime. He is a young man, about twenty-three years old, of medium build, five feet ten or eleven inches in height, dark complexion, brown hair and eyes, with a soft voice. Has a scar * * * * and * * * * A man supposed to be he, and giving the name of Four Horse Frank, has been traced to * * Bar * * * gone South * * * further particulars address:

"MAYOR OF NEW ORLEANS."

That was what Colonel Wildmont, slowly and sometimes with difficulty, read; and there were words that were altogether unintelligible, though Belshazzar shook his head as if he could supply them.

At the description every one looked hard at the prisoner, and more than one smiled at the vagueness of the resemblance to be traced in the man before them. Nine out of ten would even have been willing to say that though he might be Four Horse Frank sure enough, he was not the man described.

Height, complexion, hair and eyes answered well enough, but his build was stout rather than medium, and his voice was loud and clear rather than soft. Perhaps Belshazzar noticed this, for he added, eagerly:

"Give ther date, kunnel, give ther date! I'll admit he's ten year older, an' hez growed a heap; but don't furgit that I went South with him, an' know him of old."

"Ten years, or almost," said the colonel, reflectively; "in that time a man naturally would change. If a soft voice didn't harden up with the experiences this gentleman looks as though he might have had, it would be strange. It may be the same, and there may be twenty thousand dollars in it, but I would hardly care to buy your chances at ten per cent. And I see trouble ahead. You will probably have to keep him until you can communicate with the Mayor of New Orleans. By this time the reward may have been withdrawn. Then there will have to be extradition papers, the man will have to be identified, tried and convicted. Really, gentlemen, it would save the world at large a heap of expense, and our friend here, Belshazzar, a large amount of anxiety, if we hung him at once, and were done with it."

At this extraordinary proposition, which sounded as though it might be given in sober earnest, the crowd looked dubiously at the colonel and then at the prisoner—and then broke into a general laugh.

"Guess we orter, kunnel; but p'haps Belshazzar wouldn't be willin'. Thar wouldn't be no chance fur ther twenty thousand, an' he means fur ter hev it ef it's in ther wood. But it's rathyer a shame to put a stranger in ther old caboose. Ef he'd jest say he'd make a night ov it with the boys, I'd be fur turnin' him loose tell Brick heared frum headquarters."

The colonel frowned in spite of himself, and right there Roaring Rob and some others of the boys, who knew him, if anything, better than Rob did, made up their minds that, however much Wildmont might respect law and order, he would not sigh very deeply if both were temporarily suspended in Blue Blazes if only this stranger was suspended with them. If the crowd had followed his hint he would have meant it, and Rob thought it might not be too late for the colonel to try to push the point.

But Wildmont had found the people at the Lair in too good a humor to be led into anything of the kind—for the present at least. The frown melted so easily into a smile that it seemed as though he had never been doing anything else.

"Oh, of course, boys, we can't give him what he ought to have because we're afraid the law won't, and I was just telling what always seemed to me the best in such cases. Belshazzar will have to put him in the lock-up, the town will have to hire a jailer, and all of us bother around with him for a month to come. Then, if there's a chance for our worthy marshal to get his twenty thousand, I've no doubt he'll be glad enough to take his prisoner to New Orleans; but I'd like to know what we are to do without him for the month or so that he will be gone. Let us hope the young man will make a desperate effort to escape. Perhaps he don't know that we depend more on the revolver of our deputy sheriff than we do on the bolts and bars of our jails."

The colonel looked a little queerly at the prisoner, who was taking it all in with rather more than an average coolness.

"See hyer, kunnel, don't you think you're putting on a heap of biz to one pair of shoulders? So fur, you're chief ov police, governor ov ther Territory, jedge of ther court, destrict attorney, jury, law, gospel, an' everything else. Mebbe Blue Blazes ain't nothing ter say—like ez not you own all that—but, thar's some men in Louisany that may not think jest as your head waggles. And, unless they've deptytized you ter try this case, it don't look ther squar' thing fur you ter be gittin' so fur forrards. A man ain't always guilty till ther case are tried. Of course I'm innocent, but you kin try a man fur anything ef you're willin' ter stand ther after-claps. Now, give us a rest on this chin; take me to the calaboose, an' put me in my leetle bed. It's time this court adjourned."

Four Horse Frank said his say without interruption, and for answer Wildmont only smiled a little more broadly, and waved his hand to Belshazzar, who, at the signal, put his hand on the shoulder of the prisoner.

"Don't be so tetchy, old man. When I clapped on ther nippers I jest dropped everything like private feelin' tell the law told me ter take 'em off ag'in. You shell hev a fair shake ef I have ter fight fur you ter git it. Ef yer wasn't seein' a court an' jury in every bush you'd know ther kunnel war only funnin' you. Step along, now! Ther lock-up are clear to ther other end ov town, an' I'll hev ter show you ther way myself. It ain't everybody I'd trust with sich a packidge."

In obedience to the order Four Horse Frank stepped out readily, and with what he was willing to aver was half the population of Blue Blazes at his heels. It seemed as though complete unanimity of feeling had been secured by the interest excited in the case of the prisoner, and the fate of the musicians was entirely forgotten.

The lock-up was on the other side of the town; but the town was not very large. Their destination was soon reached, and Four Horse Frank ushered into his place of solitary confinement.

It was a low stone building of sufficient strength for the ordinary "drunks" for which it was devised, but would hardly be expected to hold a desperate murderer, without the assistance of a guard and his revolver, as Frank had already been warned.

As the prisoner glanced around him, showing pretty plainly that he was by no means delighted with the place, Roaring Rob, who had managed to get reasonably close, whispered a word or two of comfort.

"Take it easy, pard, take it easy. Ef I ain't off bad, you've camped in a heap sight worse places, an' ef they don't let up on you to-morrer, look fur some ov us boys 'long about mid-night."

Frank nodded, and continued to explore. A man held a lantern; but the chances were he intended to take it along with him when he went, and a prisoner in a strange jail wants a chance to at least see where the rats come out at.

"Thar's a sorter bunk," said Belshazzar, pointing to a rude affair that occupied one corner.

"We warn't expectin' yer quite so soon, an' things ar'n't jest fixed fur housekeepin'; but we'll hev that all straight by to-morrer; I'd stay with yer myself ter-night, but I'm 'feared I couldn't keep my hands off. But I'll be jest outside—me, er one ov ther boys—an' ef you want arv thing, 'ceptin' ter git out, jest whissel an' we'll be with yer, an' 'member, ef we see yer tryin' ter skip, we'll begin tryin' ter shoot. So-

long. I'll look in ag'in when I've went ther rounds."

Brick motioned the crowd out, and with a last look at his man, by the light of the upheld lantern, closed the door, locked it carefully, and departed, leaving the prisoner alone in the darkness.

"Well, if this don't beat cock-fighting!" soliloquized Four Horse Frank, and at the same time, compressing his hands, the bracelets dropped off as readily as though they had been unlocked!

"I might have gone anywhere else in the wide world and not struck such a crazy loon. Of course he had to be right here, armed with the documents. I *could* send for Garland; but that would bust my game. I never drew out yet while the coin lasted, and I'm not going to now. Maybe I won't find out much, but the way things look I'm going to have a frolic, such as you read about. Wildmont acts as though he were using the worthy marshal, to help him on something he has in for me. I don't often miss when I size up a man; and he looks as though he'd like to kill me. Let's see how the thing would work. Alone in the jug. Corpse found in the morning. If the dear departed wasn't killed trying to escape, he was murdered by this lunatic at the door. Frank, my child, if you want this frolic to amount to anything, your mother's eldest darling had better be getting out of this."

He looked around him as he spoke, but the place was as dark as it well could be. It was fortunate that he had examined the room so thoroughly when he had the opportunity. As far as he had seen there was no spot, unless it was the floor, that was available for attack. What was under the bunk he did not know, but he intended to see.

Without delay he advanced, and after arranging a blanket struck a match.

Under the bunk there was very little difference, except that the lath of the floor was less closely packed.

"If the man with the star is going to look in on me soon, the question is whether I had better wait for him and stand the chances, or try to get away before he puts in his appearance. And I'd like to know about how deep in the ground the walls of this shebang are supposed to extend? I'm not much on the dig, but if nothing better offers, I suppose I had better sink a shaft and run a tunnel. With my stock of tools it's probable I'll get through the work at least several days after the funeral, but there's nothing like trying. Let's take another squint. It's a consolation that, with that big padlock to open, they can't surprise me at my labors."

He lit another match, looked around, listened to see if he could hear any sounds without that might indicate the approach of any one, or that the guard was trying to watch him, or was dangerously near. Then he fell to work.

His plan, such as it was, simply provided for getting out by digging a hole under the wall. After that he had to take the chance of being able to get away unseen, and without a tussle with the guard.

He knew nothing about the conformation of the ground outside, or the nature of the soil through which he had to penetrate, but from the sample he could see in the floor he thought he could not have much trouble to remove the dirt, if he could only work fast enough.

The marshal had relieved him of the belt of arms at his waist, but had made no search of his person, consequently he knew nothing of the pair of derringers in his sleeves, or the bowie in his boot. The latter he used in his attack on the floor, and as it was a heavy, broad-bladed weapon, it was just about as good a thing as he could have desired for working in such contracted quarters as he had under the bunk.

Having calculated about how long it would take him to dig his tunnel, he did not allow himself to hurry. Undue haste might break the blade and destroy his chance for escape in that direction.

Of course it might prove that the stone walls of the lock-up were sunk too deeply in the ground for him to undermine, and in that case he had determined to attempt to attack the roof, though he could not proceed as silently, nor did the prospect of success seem as good.

He had a good supply of matches, and from time to time lit one to see how his work was progressing; but he labored in the dark, now and then quitting to listen. There was a man on guard outside, who seemed to come to the door now and then, but said nothing.

This of itself was suspicious. To the prisoner it seemed that this was one of Wildmont's men, and if it was intended that there should be foul play in the cell that night things could not have been better arranged to further it.

The work went steadily on, the hole growing deeper and larger. The rocks in the side of the wall were too large to attack, but to his delight Frank found that the bottom tier lay almost on the surface of the ground, and unless there was something beyond to interfere, success was almost certain. Under the bunk the dirt lay piled around him.

Finally he was lying under the wall itself with, as he thought, the way almost open. The

perspiration was rolling down his face, and for the first time he worked with nervous haste.

Then, suddenly, he felt something like a shudder in the ground, which gave way in front of him, and he pitched heavily, and head-first, downward!

CHAPTER VII.

A BAD PLACE FOR DETECTIVES.

THE fall that followed Four Horse Frank's sudden exit from the lock-up was brief in time and distance, though trying on the nerves for the little season it lasted.

Probably a dozen feet he dropped, until his head struck upon a broad, flat stone, when, for a few moments, his struggles were over.

Very little good would it have done if his wits had been ever so much about him. In the fall the knife had dropped from his grasp, while he would have had no time to draw his derringers, since half a dozen men threw themselves on him the moment he reached the bottom of the cave-like apartment into which he had been precipitated.

"Take it easy, lads," ordered a sharp voice. "Don't tear him to pieces, for we may want him by and by. It's the sharp that Belshazzar put into the lock-up. He's been trying to tunnel out, and has dropped from the frying-pan into the fire. That kind are never very badly hurt, even if they don't happen to fall on their feet. Tie him up, and we'll see what we can make of him when he comes to."

"We can't very well take him back again without giving ourselves away. I always did say the cellar was too near the old stone jug. We'd better knock him in the head and look out for ourselves. When they miss him they'll find us—sure."

"A heap of sense in that, Fancy," answered the owner of the first voice.

"Now that we have him, we've got to keep him; and the best plan is to throw the outsiders off the scent. You go outside, back of the jail, and do a heap of hollowing, and a little shooting if you want to. Then chase the prisoner off into the brush, and you'll have all the town that is awake after you. For the balance, we don't care. We'll fix things up here so they can find a hole under the wall, if they look; and nothing else. To-morrow I'll see that the town has two or three of you repairing damages. You get around back; and by that time we'll begin to investigate this party and see what's to be done with him."

The speaker was used to having his suggestions carried out, and that with promptness.

In this case there was no delay. The man called Fancy withdrew, while Four Horse Frank was hastily dragged away from the spot. In half an hour Fancy returned, and by that time there was a tunnel under the wall of the calaboose, but nothing to indicate that the prisoner was under the adjacent house—which was built at a distance of only a few yards from the lock-up. For twenty minutes the unlucky Frank, under strong guard, and, with hands and feet tightly tied, was allowed to wonder where he was, and how he got there.

"By glory!" was his thought, as he looked around him and saw that every man there was masked, with a piece of plain, black crape.

"I've tumbled into a sweet little den, here. If I'm not wide off, they won't dare to let me go, even if they don't train under the banner of Colonel Wildmont. They're getting ready to have a little talk. Shall I tell them the whole truth, or shall I try them with a little bluff? We'll see how the conversation goes before we decide."

Still uncertain as to his future course, but aware that when he stumbled into this hiding-place he hit upon a secret that night that might well cost him his life, he listened closely to the sharp, crisp voice of the seeming leader.

"Now then, young man, we're ready for you. You understand that all Blue Blazes knows you have vanished from the lock-up, and that portion of it not here imagines you have jumped the town. You understand, also, that it would be a pretty hard thing for us if attention was called to our snug little underground retreat. To prevent that there is only one method that I know of, and that is, for you to croak. If not, why not? If you have any arguments looking in another direction now's the time to open them out. But you want to speak them plain and very slow."

"Blame me, ef I know what ter say!" was the very frank answer. "I ain't one ov ther beggin' kind, an' ef I war I'd skassly know ov any reason ter give. Ov course, I don't want ter die, an' I wouldn't tell a livin' soul. All I'm after is ter skip ther game an' go somewhar else; but how'm I goin' ter make yer b'lieve me? Ef you c'u'd s'pect a man that's wanted to ther tune ov twenty thousand dollars ov runnin' his neck inter a noose jest ter sell yer out, why, good, common sense would be clean throwed away on yer."

The man in the mask laughed shortly. "A very neat game it has certainly been, all through; but, fortunately, we know you, and cannot be deceived. Luck has been in your favor, to be sure, but, all the same, what you

have blundered onto you would never let go of until you had run the last one of us in."

"I don't ketch on."

"Come, now, don't try to play that game. It won't work. Why, we were looking for you all along the road, and if it had not been for some stupid blundering you would never have got here at all. You came expressly to find us. All this nonsense with Belshazzar was put on. He pretended that you were the man that all Blue Blazes knows he has been hunting for years, but we know that is either a big mistake or a big game, and that you are no more Four Horse Frank than I am."

"Well?"

"You are a detective. Your name is Dan Garland, and you came down here expressly to hunt up Captain Howl and his men."

The accusation might have been continued, but it was interrupted by an ominous growl from the other masked men. The statement seemed to be a surprise to them; but evidently it was believed. After what had been already said, it was certainly an unexpected accusation to Four Horse Frank, though he spoke steadily enough.

"Wu'ss, an' more ov it. I never seen Belshazzar afore, an' I don't want ter see him ag'in. Ez fur bein' Dan Garland—I'll sw'ar ag'in' that ez long ez I hev breath. Ef thar's ary man hyer thet knows ther cold-blooded law-bound, let him take a squar' look at me, an' he'll tell yer, jest too quick, how wide off yer be."

"You would not offer the bluff if you did not know that the men who know you are absent, and that Dan Garland in disguise can be recognized only by the devil himself."

"But, I sw'ar yer 'way off. Why, jest let me explain."

"No explanations are needed. You say you are a crook; but we know you are a detective."

"I know, an' you fellers say," said Frank, doggedly.

"Well; we'll give you the benefit of the doubt, just as far as we can. You may lay off in lavender until the boys come back. If they say you *are* Dan Garland—good-by, John! You'll never go out of this again, alive or dead."

"But, ef they say I *ain't*? Come, boss, do ther squar' thing fur a poor devil, thet's down on his luck. Ef ye'r' all mistooked, an' it turns out I'm jest what I say I be—then what?"

"Then we'll give you a show, sure enough. You are a fellow of nerve, we know; and if we are once sure you are not troubled with a conscience you can join the gang. Otherwise, you must hop the twig. I won't promise you much of a job to start with, and there will be some one watching you all the time, ready to blow you cold the moment you try to play us foul. If you prove yourself a faithful crook for a couple of months, we may be able to work you up into something better."

"That's my name, all ther time. Can't yer swear me in now, so ez I'll be all ready ter go ter work when ther boys git back?"

"Don't be too previous, Daniel. There's plenty of time fer everything that is necessary; but not a moment to waste in foolishness. If we have to hang you what's the use; and I'm not sure how it would work about putting a brother over the divide. No. You'll remain as you are; and be thankful for the mercies that you don't deserve. And I'm open for a bet, and I'll make it two to one, that this time to-morrow you won't be talking."

"All right! Anything in reason," responded Frank, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"It's you that'll be doin' ther sinnin', an' I'll be sailin' through ther flume like a leetle saint. Now, jest show me whar I kin bunk in an' I'll take a snooze. I've bin hard at work an' feel ez though I could sleep a storm."

The request was taken as it was given—without any apparent idea that there might be anything behind. Fancy, at a nod from the spokesman, led him off, his hands still fastened.

Not that it was very far to go.

On the opposite side of the room there was a small door, sufficiently stout to belong to a regular dungeon.

Opening this, Fancy led the prisoner into a cage, compared with which the lock-up was a palace. It was not over six feet in any direction—perhaps not that in height—and at a glance Frank saw that there would be no tunneling out here, even if he had retained the knife that he lost when he took his tumble.

"It ain't a purty place to look at," sniffed Fancy, pushing his prisoner forward; "but it's a heap too good for the likes of you. If I had my way you bet you'd never come out of it alive."

Then the heavy door was banged to, and fastened, and the pseudo Four Horse Frank, for the second time that night, was left to his own disagreeable reflections.

CHAPTER VIII.

FANCY GETS A FALL.

WHEN Fancy turned to face his partners they were gathered in the further corner, talking in a low tone. Without delay he joined them.

"Well, Fancy, do you think you can keep your bird?"

The captain, as he seemed to be, looked up and laughed, for his satellite was grim and dissatisfied.

"There's on'y one way to hold such chickens, and that's to wring their necks before you put them in the coop. I'm not making big promises but I tell you square, if I catch him trying to get out he'll never make another wiggle. I'll kill him dead."

"And so you ought to. It will save the trouble of drawing lots, to see who is to do the job. Of course, he's got to climb the golden stairs; but first of all we'll try and use him for what he is worth."

"What can the likes of him be worth? You're fooling with a mighty sharp blade, don't you forget it. If he had both hands loose I'd back him, just as he stands, to take in the crowd. He struck a little bad luck when he tumbled into the den, but the streak won't last, and when it begins to come his way—look a leetle out! Don't we know him of old?"

"That's all right, Fancy. But here's the way the land lays: If it's not Dan Garland—though of course I believe it is—we have nothing particular to fear. He can't get out; and if he did, all that it would amount to would be that you would have to change your quarters, here, and we would be out a very convenient place for meeting. If it is, we can use him."

"To knot the ropes to hang us all."

"Not a bit of it. He's made a square offer to work for us to save his neck. Of course he intends to be looking for his chance; and meantime do nothing that is off color."

"He'll be the worst fooled man you ever saw. Dan Garland can write from the samples three names for us so the men themselves, if they could rise from their graves, wouldn't know the difference."

"And he'll be apt to do it!"

"Of course he will. He is looking for the road-agent fol-de-rol, and we'll give him a chance to show off in something else. Before he knows it we will have him. Then he can retire."

"You can try it, but it will be no good. He will hang you all unless he dies to-night. I'll make my will, and then keep out of his way."

"After he gets loose, you mean—and then you had better keep out of mine," responded the man, sternly.

"For the present I leave him in your charge, and will hold you responsible. Alive or dead, you've got to hold him here. Now, then, there is nothing further before this meeting, and we may as well begin to adjourn. Go out carefully, all of you, and perhaps you had better use the tunnel. I will stay until the last."

The man called Fancy folded his arms and dropped moodily into a seat. One by one those present went quietly out, until at last he was left alone.

After that he sat for fully five minutes in silence, speaking at last, unconsciously, to himself.

"All right, Captain Howl! I've given you fair warning. If you won't take it I must look out for myself."

"How are you going to do it, Fancy, dear?"

The man sprang to his feet as if he had heard a shot. He had not been aware that he was speaking aloud, and he could have sworn that he was still alone.

The voice was a feminine one, and the person he saw standing before him was a woman, spite of the masculine style of her semi-disguise.

"I wanted to meet the captain here, but I find that I have missed him. Perhaps it is as well. You were spouting something very like treason, then, and you know what the penalty of treason is?"

"Death!" responded Fancy promptly enough; "but, I tell you, I didn't think of such a thing until the captain led the way. He may not care for his neck; but, I swear, I think a heap of mine."

"What's bitten you now, old man?" laughed the woman.

"Something prodigious must have happened to pull you so far out of shape. Tell us how the land lays, and I'll see what's the matter with the situation."

In as few words as possible he told her about the stranger who had made his appearance in Blue Blazes, and whom the captain had denounced as the well-known detective, Dan Garland.

"And how does it come that Howl dropped to him? Garland is a man you hear of oftener than see, and I don't think our worthy leader knows him from a stuffed goose at a Christmas dinner."

"The boys sent word along down the line that he was coming, and in what shape. Of course no one but the captain had hold of the secret at first. It was arranged to hold him up on the way, but it didn't work; though, if the boys had known, perhaps he would not have slipped through so easy. They thought he was only a side-show to another circus altogether, or you can bet they would have left cold meat on the trail, if they could not bring him in alive."

"And that's what you are grumbling about? Bless my soul! What an ungrateful wretch you are! Here you have him, safe and sound, all

tied up where he can do no damage; and you worry because you can't kill him at once. Rest easy. All things come to the man that waits. I think I will have to take a peep at him myself."

"For Heaven's sake! what do you mean? You might just as well go to stir up a roaring grizzly! Keep away from him, Miss Arnaugh! I'm responsible; and if you put your hand in it's going to make black trouble."

The little woman had moved toward the door behind which Four Horse Frank was confined. Her hand was already on the bolt; but at Fancy's earnest outbreak she turned half-way around and looked at him with a world of merriment dancing in her bright, hazel eyes.

Despite her dress she was a peculiarly handsome woman.

There was something so dainty in her face that one wondered why she should be willing so far to unsex herself. Fancy's pleading seemed only to furnish her with amusement. She looked as though she more than ever wanted to see the man of whom even such men as Fancy and the captain were not ashamed to confess themselves at least a little afraid.

"Bring the light, old man. Don't be backward. If you want the order in black and white I'll write it down. You know that when I want anything I want it bad; and I'm not going to be denied."

Fancy caught up a lamp and followed, his other hand, meantime, resting on his revolver. He had uttered his solemn protest, and now was willing to abide the consequences. Only, as the young woman noiselessly undid the fastenings and threw back the door, he drew his pistol and held it at a ready.

If he expected a sudden rush, Fancy was certainly widely mistaken. In spite of his discomfort, the prisoner lay on his side, his face toward the door, and though he awoke with a start as the light shone upon his eyes, it was pretty certain that he had been sleeping.

He woke, too, with his wits all about him. He arose somewhat stiffly, and stared at his visitors questioningly, while he was being inspected just as keenly in return.

Then the girl-woman broke into a short, little, satisfied laugh.

"That Dan Garland!" she exclaimed.

"Well, I didn't think you could be so far off. Stand up, my little man, if you think it's worth while to take that much trouble to keep from going over the range. I know you, like a book; and a monstrous good man you can be when the signs are right. That's it! I didn't think you would sulk when it might be that life or death was hanging on it. Thanks! There you see him, Fancy. He's a full inch taller than your bug-bear; and, not to make him vain, a great deal better-looking."

"You sure of what you're saying?" growled Fancy, not entirely convinced, and scanning Miss Arnaugh's eyes intently to see if she was in earnest.

"Sure, without a doubt. Names don't go for anything—he's not the man you know by the name of Dan Garland—and I wouldn't have liked to guess what he calls himself now; but if he's anything but a mighty chief with pistols and pasteboards, come to Blue Blazes to see what he can find to devour, he must have changed wonderfully since I knew him as Arkansas Al. Own up, now, will you? Tell Fancy where and when you first met me, and what you were doing. I owe you one, and I'm not the kind to forget."

"Thanks, Miss Arnaugh. You hit center every time you pick trigger. I'm the unfortunate that pulled you out of Mud Run the time of the freshet, when Pop Overcamp's stage went down an' two upper-deckers an' Pop war drowned. That war nigh onto two year ago. The next night I skinned Billy Wheeler at bluff, an' hed ter fight pretty much ther town. I made ther raffle all right, but thought I'd better skip with ther plunder, which is why I never seen you sence."

The prisoner's style of speech had changed slightly, though probably Fancy did not notice it; he was watching the two so intently, more interested than surprised by what they said.

"And, unfortunately, you have been giving the name of Four Horse Frank since you reached this town. To say the least, that seems suspicious. If I understood exactly what it meant I might take the responsibility of accepting your word and turning you loose. It's a very awkward affair all around. I don't want to desert the man that once saved my life; but you must see yourself that you have a very awkward percentage on us, especially as you are bound to be in the hands of the law if you stay any time in Blue Blazes."

"I'll make you a fair and square offer, and give you all night to think it over. I am here hunting a man; but I mean him no harm. Open the doors and I'll run my chances with the gay Belshazzar, keep my mouth still, and let you and your gang alone, unless you interfere with me. I wouldn't have skipped the calaboose if I hadn't seen that some one had something in for me."

"That talk sounds very nice," said Miss Arnaugh, reflectively. "But your very words seem to mark you down as a dangerous man."

Supposing I don't accept your generous offer—what then?"

"I'll get out in spite of you, and put the necks of every last one that will fit a rope, where they belong. If yours goes along with the rest it will be your own fault. I talk with the bark on, but I mean every word I say."

"Even though I may not have the power?"

"You have it or you wouldn't stand here chaffing me this time of night."

"Right you are; and, strange as it may seem, though your threats do not terrify me a bit, I believe I will use it. Fancy, take him out and turn him loose. The captain has no use for him, and I have a debt to pay. You heard his promise?"

"Promise?" fairly shouted Fancy. "What's a promise to such as he? If I'd do it the captain would put me in his box, too quick! Think a little, Miss Arnaugh, and you'll see how it is yourself. I'm responsible for him, and you know what that means. If he's not Garland—and after what you say of course he can't be—he'll only be sent out of the damp so much the quicker. The man's a fraud clean through, and I won't let him fool you. See the captain first, and if he says so it's all right. Till then I can't and won't."

"Ah! That is just about as treasonable as the words I heard you mutter a little while ago. You can't and won't? Eh?"

The dark eyes flashed fire, and her little hand went to her bosom for a weapon.

"Don't be too hard on me, Miss Arnaugh," gritted the man, crouching as if for a spring.

"You know I'd die afore I'd let any harm come to you; but I must protect the rest."

"At him, then!"

She looked at Fancy, but she spoke to the prisoner, and, as she spoke she jerked out the derringer, the handle of which she had been feeling.

And at the same time Four Horse Frank came through the air like a thunderbolt, and without blow or clutch fairly crushed his jailer to the ground.

CHAPTER IX.

CROOKS AND CRANKS OF THE FEMALE PERSUASION.

"I CAN follow orders if he won't," said Frank, quietly looking up, his knees on Fancy's arms, while one hand, guiltless of gyve or thong, lay suggestively near to his throat.

"I don't want to be rough with him, but you're the boss. Say anything but corpse or cripple and I'm with you, just as solid as when I drew you out of Mud Run."

"Then hand me his belt, and let him up. He's a good man, but he knows too much for the size of his wisdom. Perhaps this will teach him a lesson."

She had already possessed herself of the revolver that had fallen from Fancy's hand, and, though she made no parade of holding it so, the muzzle covered Four Horse Frank. He was still at her mercy.

Frank did not seem to notice that. He rose with the belt in his hand, passing it to Aileen Arnaugh, and then, folding his arms, stood leisurely leaning against the post of the door, watching the two without any particular concern in his countenance.

"Well, Fancy, what is it to be, peace or war?" she asked, as the man, after one or two choking gasps, rose slowly from the floor.

"I have nothing to say—now. I know he's not the man the captain wants; and that lets me out if I have the chance to kill him. If I don't, I'll tell the story straight as a string and take what he gives me. Between you you've got away with me, and I deserve what I get."

"All right. If you can take him into camp after he's away from here that is his lookout, and I've nothing to do with it if the captain is satisfied. I'm only making things a little even. For fear you won't give him a show, I'll leave you here, for a bit, while I escort him to the outer world. Then I'll come back and turn you out. Take a seat, if you please, and wait till I come."

She coolly motioned to Frank to follow her, shut and fastened the door, and then led him carelessly through the underground passage through which the men, at the command of the captain, had taken their departure.

Once in the open air she halted a moment.

"Perhaps I have done a foolish thing; but I was always a stickler about paying my debts. I have done as well with you as you could expect, and shall hold you to your promise to let us alone as long as you are unmolested. I would advise that you leave the town at once, but I don't insist! Of one thing be certain. I shall not assist you again. Here are Fancy's weapons; take them instead of your own. Good-night."

The strange woman nodded and went away, leaving Four Horse Frank to his own devices.

"Well, I swear!" thought he, as he glanced after her with a puzzled look.

"This certainly beats the Jews! I didn't expect luck like that; and I don't understand it, now that it has come along. I think I'll go quietly around to the Grand Occidental and

sleep over it. If Belshazzar gets on the trail to-night I'll have to grin and bear it. If he don't, maybe something will turn up in the morning. Will run the risk and see."

As he approached the hotel with the high-sounding title, he was not at all certain what course he would pursue, even in case he found the building still open. To appear as Four Horse Frank, and ask for his room, seemed to be little less than inviting arrest; while, to slip quietly in, and attempt to explore the house in search of a vacant bed, might bring him into trouble.

A dark figure stepped in front of him.

"Hello, pard! Are you the man with the four horses? Blamed ef I didn't think you'd be 'round! Put it thar, pard! I jest knew you wouldn't go off 'thout yer dunnage, an' so, when ther fun at ther Spotted Dog war over, I hoofed it 'round hyer ter see ef I couldn't pick yer up, an' tell yer it's all right. You give 'em ther slip most mighty nice, now, don't you furgit it."

The voice was easily recognizable as that of Roaring Rob; and he seemed very much in earnest in offering his services.

"Thanks," answered Four Horse Frank. "I'm not caring about my traps, but I do want to fill in the balance of the night with good, square sleep, so as to have a clear head for that lunatic marshal in the morning."

"Oh, Belshazzar's all right. He's on yer trail hot, an' steerin' fur Muddy Fork. Ef he gits back in four-an'-twenty hours I'm worse fooled. Ef you don't want ter spin 'round town a bit I'll tuck yer in yer leetle bed. I know ther ropes at ther Grand Ox. Foller me."

He linked his arm into that of Four Horse Frank, and quietly led him into the house, the front door of which was wide open.

In spite of the fact that the passage was perfectly dark, Rob stepped steadily forward for a dozen paces before he halted, and noiselessly threw open a door.

"Hyar's yer room," he whispered. "I seen him chalk it ag'in' yer name, Number Thirteen, an' you won't find no one ter bother. Good-night. I'll see yer in ther A. M."

The man was really as anxious for rest as he declared, for he had been on the go several nights already, and from his experiences of the evening he had an idea that it might be safer to take his sleep now than later on, when the game at Blue Blazes had more thoroughly developed.

The little pen in which he found himself was easily explored, for one acquainted with the average first-class hotels of the mining-camps. He found the bed without trouble, and having silently assured himself that it was without an occupant, he slipped off his boots and laid himself down. He did intend to review the programme of the past evening, but long before he had reached the tunnel from the lock-up, in his retrospection, he was sleeping sweetly.

A touch aroused him.

Whether he had been sleeping an hour, or half a dozen he would not have ventured even a guess. He simply thrust his hand upon Fancy's revolver and waited in silence.

"Dan Garland!"

The exclamation was in the lowest of whispers, but sounded as though it came from the lips of a woman.

"Good glory! Here comes the beauteous Aileen of the lovely face. What's up? Better allow the answer to develop."

So thought the man on the bed, and he gave no answer, even when the name was again breathed in his ear. Of course he was not certain that he had not given himself away by a first start on awakening, but he kept up his regular breathing, and so far as sound went would have passed for an easy sleeper.

"No use to try to deceive me. You are awake and listening, and you should recognize my voice. I am Marquita Garcia—and to-day I was your fellow-passenger in the stage. I told you I must see you to-night, and have been waiting in vain. Why did you not come?"

"Excuse me," was his answer, in the same carefully guarded tone. "You may be ther lady ov ther stage, but I disremember making any app'intment. Ef I had I'd had a purty consid'able lively time tryin' ter keep it. My own private affairs hez kept me on ther keen hustle, ez it war. An ez fur that name—I don't answer to it, never did, and won't tell I want my throat sliced wide open by ther crooks an' cranks ov Blue Blazes—ov which thar's a host. Ef I dared ter suggest, I'd say ye'r puttin' me in a 'embarrassin' position ef some one war ter come in. Ef you'd jest ez soon, I'd prefer yer goin' to yer own room, an' we'll finish this talk up in ther mornin'."

"I daren't," exclaimed the young lady guardedly, though there was no mistaking her earnestness. "They're waiting there, to kill me. When I knew I needed help I came straight to you. If you fail me where shall I go?"

"I knew she war a crook er a crank an' crank hez it," breathed Frank as if to himself. "An' what a slick tongue fur a Mexican damsel! Sure, Thar's nothin' real but heavin'!"

"I am no Mexican! Your eyes should have penetrated the disguise long ago. I am Marion Lytton, come to take up the trail myself,

where all the rest have bungled and failed. Now, will you believe me?"

"Clear ez mud! That is, all exceptin' thet, ef others are failin' you ain't havin' much success. An' yet, reflectin' on what's happened to myself, thar may be somethin' in it—an' Four Horse Frank never throwed off on a woman. Whar's that room or yourn? You kin stay hyer, ef it's any satisfaction, until I go thar an' make things safe. I'll do it in a holy minnit, by ther clock, ef I kin git a sight ov ther danger. What's ther number ov yer lay-out?"

"I do not know, but it is the last door on this side of the passage. I heard them talking beneath my window. Something frightened them away, but they will return. I know it."

"All right, Mr. Merriman. We'll git thar in style! Ef you hear shootin', shoutin', an' an awful racket, jest lay low an' keep quiet. You kin give me that confab's hist'ry in ther mornin', ef I'm still livin'. Ef not, explain things ter suit yerself. I'm goin', now. An' I wouldn't advise yer ter enter your room in ther dark afore I git back. I'll hev both eyes open an' shoot at a wink. So-long."

Then Four Horse Frank, in his stocking feet, moved along the passage so noiselessly that his feminine visitor was not aware that he had left the room.

The door he was seeking was not entirely closed and through the small crack left a faint light shone.

He stopped and listened, his hand lingering near the latch, which he did not as yet touch.

"There may be something in it," he muttered; "but as yet they haven't opened operations. Here goes. Lucky that there's a little light. If any fun begins I'll have a chance to take it all in. But if there's a racket that brings down the house, it seems to me the situation as they find it will be a leetle peculiar."

With a noiseless laugh he pushed the door open and entered the room, stooping low so that he would not be seen from the outside if any one was on the watch.

The coop that did duty for a bedroom was only a little larger than the one he had left, and its furniture was just about the same. There was no place to hide, unless, indeed, he crawled under the bed. Cautiously he approached the window, which was open.

He could see nothing and hear very little, yet he was inclined to believe that there was some one without, so that he stood for some time listening.

Then there was a slight rustle, that might be made by some one approaching.

"No use to crowd the procession at the start—may as well give it a chance to get fairly into line," thought Frank. "I'll be good to myself and take a rest. When they come, if they do come, I'll be ready with the neatest surprise-party on record."

He threw himself at full length on the bed, wrapping the covering around him, so that his figure was concealed, and waited, with his ears about as wide open as they could well be.

He was almost certain, now, that he heard low whispering outside, and could imagine just how the rascals were eying the window; though he did not understand why the attack was delayed, if there was to be any.

Only one explanation suggested itself.

"Perhaps they're waiting for the boss of the outfit. If that's the case, I'll take him in for his full size when he does come. They can hardly hang a fellow for a pot-shot at a man that's getting in at his window. The cuss of it is, that it's not exactly my window, and I'm not sure about the party that has the lease of it."

A hand on the ledge of the window cut short his reflections. Something was coming at last.

The noise was very slight, but not hard to interpret by the watcher. Some one had raised his head to the level of the open window, and was listening, with eyes turned toward the figure on the bed.

CHAPTER X.

THE BAILIFF LOSES HIS GRIP.

FOR a moment the situation remained unchanged. Then, the would-be intruder climbed over the window-sill with the agility of a cat, and on tiptoe advanced toward the bed. In his hand he held something that hardly looked like a deadly weapon; and when, by chance, it came nearly in a line with the light, Four Horse Frank decided, by intuition, as it seemed, that it was a sponge.

He understood the game at once, and was ready for it. He had buried his head in the pillow and drawn the clothing so around him, that the deception could hardly be discovered without something of an examination. At the same time he had left a place through which he could see what was going on.

He had his surprise all ready planned; and just when the intruder was bending over the bed, the hand that held the sponge outstretched, Frank caught him by the throat and wrist with an iron grip, and with a sudden jerk, drew his head and hand together, burying his nose in the sponge.

"If it's chloroform, my young friend, I'll give you a taste," he thought, as he managed to roll his victim over.

The struggle was not altogether noiseless, but it could scarcely give much alarm to any one waiting without. Something of the kind was to be expected; chloroform never gets in its work without first arousing its victim. There was no mistake now about the drug, and Frank's principal anxiety was for it to stupefy his assailant before the throat grip produced insensibility. He shifted his fingers a little, while kneeling on the arms of the now prostrate man, and steadily kept the sponge in place. There was just light enough to show him what he was doing, and at the distance of a couple yards one could not have told him from the man that entered the window.

At least, he took his chances on that, when a low hiss came to his ears, and the sharp whisper:

"Is it all right?"

"Yes, curse you! Keep quiet a moment longer," he hissed back, at a venture.

"I'll give you the office when the time comes."

"All right, now," he added, a little later.

"Come in. She'll do to carry a mile."

A second man crept in; but not nearly so noiselessly as the first.

"Ah, you're not the boss," said Frank, sliding toward the window.

"Boss, nothin'. What the—"

The question was cut short, before it was fairly begun. Four Horse Frank sent his fist out straight from the shoulder, and as hard as he could drive.

The blow caught the man on the neck, just under the ear, and he was fairly lifted from his feet, and flung across the floor against the door, with a great crash. As soon as he had struck, Four Horse Frank turned and leaped out of the window. He was not caring a particle about who were the tools in the case so he could get his hands on the leading villain, whom he suspected to be just outside.

He never was more thoroughly mistaken than he was just then. As he dropped to the ground a man who had been crouching close to the house sprung at him, fairly crushing him in his arms. And the worst and strangest thing was that once more he had fallen into the hands of Belshazzar Brick, who had not gone to Muddy Fork at all.

"In the name ov the law, surrender, young man. I don't want ter be hard on yer, but onder th r circumstances I must take yer in."

"Let up, will yer," retorted Four Horse Frank, recognizing the voice on the instant, but making no struggle while the tension of that iron hug remained so strong.

"Don't yer see? Thar goes ther cut-throat, an' he'll git away while you're hyer, slobberin' over me! Jest take one squint behind yer an' see."

"Thunder an' blood! I see keen enough. It's Four Horse Frank I've got hold ov, an' that's ez good ez I want. I thought I'd put that runnin' rascal ter sleep when I tapped him on ther knowledge box; but ef I hev ter trade I'll stand by ther swop."

"That's all right, old man, so you don't let 'em play me foul; but, jest listen ter reason. Thar's two more ov 'em in thar, an' I'll go 'long, an' help fur all I know how ef you'll only scoop 'em in."

"Too old a bird, an' ther pinch ov salt ain't big enough. Reckon it's some ov ther boys tryin' ter take you in. Ef he'd only said so I wouldn't 'a' knocked this critter silly, thet I found outside. 'Pears ter me I heared a groan in thar. Ef you've bin damagin' any citizens ov Blue Blazes you'll hev ter stand ther rap fur it."

"But, I tell you, they wer'n't after me, at all. They meant ter take in a woman; an' I, jist like my fool head, chipped in ter help her outen ther drag! Only one squint, Belshazzar, ter see who they be, an' then I'll go 'long."

Belshazzar's attention was divided just now. He was trying to watch his prisoner, and at the same time listen for any suspicious sounds within. If he had possessed an extra pair of handcuffs he would have tried to slip them on, but unfortunately the supply was exhausted. He contented himself with retaining his gripe, and keeping his eyes open.

And just as the prisoner was making up his mind to try to give Belshazzar the back-beel, there came an interruption in his favor, and it seemed to come from the clouds.

Right down on Belshazzar's head dropped a dark ball, not seemingly very big as it came, but expanding into a bushel or so of paws and claws, that went to work in his hair and beard, and clattered over his back, and pawed at his neck, meantime jabbering maliciously in his ear.

It was a new experience with the worthy bailiff, who thought that if this was not his Satanic Majesty it was at least one of his angels. His hands dropped from Four Horse Frank, and he grabbed at his assailant with something very like a yell of dismay.

The moment Brick's fingers fell away Frank was off. He recognized the long-tailed monkey of the musicians, and though grateful for the interruption, left the quadrumana to fight his own battles, while he scrambled back into the house, hearing a sharp whistle as he went.

The whistle was a signal that Jocko understood. He had escaped from Angelo, and taken

a frolic around town. Having had his fun out he was willing to retire to his proper quarters. At the sound he was away like a flash, leaving Belshazzar Buck to stare around, for a moment entirely bewildered.

Although but little time had been wasted the room was vacant when Four Horse Frank re-entered it. He turned up the lamp enough to see that there were no traces left of the two men he had thought to find still securely anchored.

The fact was that the man he had struck had risen to his feet again. Realizing that their business enterprise was a failure, and that there was danger outside, he had picked up his still senseless companion and hurriedly made his way through the door. He had fully a minute's start. By the time Jocko was darting in one direction he was well away with his load in another.

The sleepers at the Grand Occidental were accustomed to a moderate amount of noise, and it was only when the racket between Belshazzar and the monkey began that any one was aroused. That brought some heads out of the windows on that side of the house, just in time to see the worthy marshal darting off in pursuit of a fleeting figure, to be dimly seen in the distance. Fortunately the people on the other side were not aroused at all, so that Four Horse Frank met no one in the passage, as he made his way directly to his room.

He found his lady tenant anxiously looking from the window.

"Thar, leetle woman, I reckon ther fun's over fur ter-night, an' you kin go rest yerself in in peace. I tried my best ter git at ther king-pin ov ther movement, but that confounded Brick got his oar in too deep. It war funny while it lasted, but thar wasn't ernough ov it ter 'mount ter much. I kin see, 'thout spec's, thet Blue Blazes won't agree with yer health, an' ef I war you, I'd go home in ther. fust boat."

"Not until I succeed."

The courage of the young lady had all returned to her. She spoke very firmly.

"Succeed in what, ef it's a fair question?"

"Must I go over the ground already explained so clearly? Until I find Walker Midford, and force him to disgorge. Until I clear away the mystery of the life or death of William and Willard, and can go away honestly rich or honestly poor."

"That's all?"

Perhaps her listener was inclined to be sarcastic. She answered, hotly:

"All? Yes, and enough! When others seemed to fail me, I came myself, as you more than half advised, vowing to have neither hopes nor fears until the work was done. Why is it that up till now you have made no move?"

She spoke so earnestly that it was hard to believe she did not mean what she said; but she fairly puzzled the man before her.

"I've told yer once before thet yer away off on me, an' I'll say it over again, an' slow ez yer wants it. I ain't Dan Garland! You never put me on no trail; an' ez fur a clew—I dunno what yer means. An' I'll swear thet ther real Garland ain't movin' 'bout your 'fairs faster than I am. I know him, an' ef ther' hed bin some-thin' down this way wantin' him bad, I'd hev heard it. Mebbe it's a wild guess, but I've a kinder idea thet some one's bin foolin' you. A feller thet looks like me, too, an' don't yer furt git it."

"Ah! Could it be possible?"

"Stranger things then that hev happened. But ef it are so you kin be sure ye'r' on ther right trail. How yer goin' ter work?"

"I do not know. Providence, perhaps, will assist me."

"I'll give yer one p'nter, then. Jest lay back, with yer eyes open. Ther man thet tries ter hit yer are ther one ter go fur. When yer gits him cornered, show him to yer 'tectives, an' you'll hev him foul. Not ter say that I know—wal; fix it ter suit yerself. Ther hall's empty, an' yer don't want no one ter see yer goin'. So long!"

She took the strong hint and departed. A couple of men had gone out to investigate, and the balance of the aroused ones had returned to their slumbers. As yet none of them understood to what the racket related, and she seized the opportunity to slip away unobserved. The rest of the night she puzzled over the question whether she had been hoodwinked, or whether Four Horse Frank and Dan Garland were not the same.

And for his few waking moments Four Horse Frank pondered whether his lady visitor was really Marion Lytton—or some one else; and whether the men at the window wanted her or him.

CHAPTER XI.

A BAD TIME FOR MUSICIANS.

AMONG the disappearances taking place in and around Blue Blazes there was one that did not agitate the public mind a particle, although more than one person there would have felt a particular interest in it if the facts of the case had been fully known.

The reader of course understands that Roar-

ing Rob and his friends succeeded in getting the harper and the violinist back to the Spotted Dog, where the boys made pretty nearly a full night of it.

Small coin—for that latitude—showed down on the two, and they were treated with distinguished courtesy; but they saw enough of Blue Blazes in her hours of relaxation to have a holy horror of her ways.

When the evening exercises were over the two, with their monkey, started, with some fear and trembling, toward the cabin, where they expected to find Lorette, the young tambourinist, waiting for them; and where they had planned to spend the night when they parted from her.

Jocko had been amusing others all evening; now he proposed having a little relaxation himself. He suddenly dashed away into the darkness, refusing to come back to the whistle that he usually obeyed, and never ceased from his antics and his straying until he had promenaded all over the roof of the Grand Occidental, and the back hair of Belshazzar Brick.

That capped the climax, and settled Angelo. He recognized the voice of the marshal, and decided it was then a good time to leave town.

"And Lorette?" asked Maria, when his leader broached the plan as they hurried along.

"Lorette is a good girl, if I know of her, and has sense. She will not care to stay in a camp where she is afraid to show herself after dark. If not—we lived without her, and we can do so again."

Of course they spoke in their own tongue, so that there are no idioms to represent.

"But she is so handy to have with us, and will bring in more money than even the monk."

"Never mind. If she be here she will go. If she be not we wait not. We leave word and go."

But, Lorette was there, and seemed perfectly willing to go at once. After having made her escape from Roaring Rob, she had kept out of sight, and now explained that she was in only too great a hurry to leave, to perhaps altogether suit them.

Not a bit of it. Angelo shouldered his harp, the monkey climbed on Maria Ferenza's shoulders, Lorette drew the shawl around her face, and they all trudged out of town.

They had practiced enough in their time, and were all good walkers. Daylight found them so far away from town that their figures could not have been identified at that distance, and by noon they were well up in the mountains.

Then, as they were eating their lunch, misfortune overtook them, in the shape of three or four of the road-agents.

They expected to be robbed, just as they heard the sharp order to throw up their hands, and were disgusted at the nature of their disappointment.

The outlaws laughed when Angelo went down into his pocket for the bag that contained their earnings.

"It ain't money we're after, old man, it's music," said the fellow that was the spokesman of the party.

"And we're too honest to take it without paying for it. We'll just run you into camp and have a regular blow-out. You sha'n't be hurt, and when we've had enough of it, we'll finish filling that sack of yours with coin, and send you on your way rejoicing."

It was no use to protest. With a loaded revolver pointing in his direction, Angelo's broken English subsided into an inarticulate murmur, and his companions from the outset said nothing, but stared helplessly at their leader.

"You Italians are generally more or less in our line of business, anyhow, and dog mustn't eat dog. You just fiddle your finest and we'll treat you white. We'll have to blindfold you now, for we don't want any one to have a chance to give us away, but that don't count. Finish your grub and a couple of the boys will take you in. We're only out scouting around, and got all day to do it in."

The sharp appetites, however, had by this time disappeared, and Angelo asserted that if they were to move they would just as soon go at once. Without any roughness the outlaws covered their eyes, making a thorough job of it, and away went the musicians.

The prisoners did not lag, and as each one was guided by a hand on his or her elbow, they made such very good progress that in the course of an hour, or more, their present journey came to an end.

"I don't reckon there will be any call for music before it gets dark," said one of the guides, "but perhaps the lieutenant'll have something to say. You just stand here till I tell him how things stand, and see what he's going to do about it."

He went away; and none of the three moved until he came back with a masked man dressed in a suit of white velveteen, who scanned the prisoners narrowly before he spoke.

"They seem to be the genuine thing," he said, at length.

"Take the men along, but let the girl stay here for a moment, for I have something to say to her. Don't be a fool, old man. When anything is said here, it goes, straight along."

Angelo was about to utter some sort of a protest, but a couple of sentences sternly spoken, returned him to his bearings so quickly as almost to be ridiculous. Still blindfolded, the men were led away.

Once out of hearing, and the lieutenant removed the bandage from Lorette's eyes, and looked her keenly in the face.

"You speak English?" he said, shortly.

"Verra good Eengliss. Have been here a verra long time."

"Well, I'm not sure that it's a recommendation; but we'll try you, anyhow. There's a sick lady here that is just dying for want of company, and you'll fill the bill as well as any one we'd be apt to get. If you can induce her to understand and believe that she will not be harmed, and that we are very much her friends, it will be worth your while."

"And if you attempt to play us false in any way we'll cut the throats of you and your companions with as little remorse as if you were so many dogs. In the language of the times, do you hear me warble?"

"Lorette heara verra good. Lorette maka all right. Letta all go soon?"

The girl spoke seriously, never wincing under the sharp look and keener threat, and she waited for the answer to her question with an innocence that gradually disarmed the man of his suspicion, since he smiled at last as he answered:

"Yes, yes. The boys will want some music, and if your friends don't turn sulky they will be treated right. About the time that the lady needs you no longer, the men will be tired of the fiddling and dancing, and you can all three go away together."

"And the monk?" asked Lorette, anxiously. "You would notta keepa him?"

"No, no! We wouldn't have the infernal bother in the camp. If they don't shoot him before that, you can be sure that we won't keep him behind. Now, I'll take you around to her, and you see that there's no lamentation and mourning about her bedside. We want her up and around. There's no time for mooning."

Lorette did not seem exactly to understand this, but she followed the man without question. In a very few moments she was ushered into the presence of Marion Lytton, who appeared to be both a prisoner and a very sick woman. So sick, indeed, that she at once enlisted the sympathies of the Italian, who stole softly to the rude couch, bent over the tossing girl, and gazed pityingly into her flushed and swollen face. Then she looked at the man and nodded.

"Notta verra sick. Be wella soon."

The outlaw appeared pleased with the prophecy, and went away, leaving the two alone together.

Relieved of his presence Marion tossed no more, but closed her eyes and soon was asleep, if her shut lids and regular breathing went for anything.

Lorette folded her hands and crouched in a corner, unconcernedly waiting for her to awaken.

By and by the Italian, who was keeping a closer watch than a casual observer would have believed, saw that Marion was watching her from between her half-open lids.

At that she put her finger on her lips, and gave a warning shake of the head.

There was something familiar about the gesture. Marion's eyes opened to their fullest extent, though she made no movement or sound, as she looked expectantly at the girl, who glided toward her, with finger still upraised.

"I guess things could be running our way much better," whispered the supposed Italian. "All we got to find out is who is the boss of this outfit, and we get all the trail we ought to ask for."

"You are then"—began Marion, questioningly.

"Sonny Sharp, and very much at your service," responded the seeming girl. "I told you to look out for me, down here, but I didn't know then just what shapes I was going to take. By good luck I fell in with a couple of strolling musicians, and froze right on to them. Of course they didn't suspect the fraud, after the yarn I gave them. I would have had the best chance in the world to see everything there was in the camp if a fellow by the name of Roaring Rob had not spotted me. He thought I was after him, confound him, about some picayune business down at Pinilinas, and he went for me on the spot and took his chances. If a young dude of a fellow, that seemed to be playing off innocent, hadn't shot the lights out, and then crawled under the table, I don't know where I would have come out at. I heard you were in camp, and something about the racket with the road-agents by the way, and started around to see you; but by that time you were missing, and I dropped on enough to show that the agents had come back on you. Then, my pards wanted to jump the camp and come this way. That was right in my hand, and I came along. They pulled the crowd of us on the road, which was better luck than I expected; and here I am, to give you a heap of comfort; and get you out of this when it begins to look as though we ought to go."

"You show a good deal more devotion to

your employer than I had any reason to expect; but it might have been better for you to have retained your liberty, and left me here to take advantage of the folly of this man, who has of himself solved the question that no one else could answer."

"That's so, miss. There don't seem to be anybody else that would want to bother with you, and from what you told me before, he had certainly dropped to it that you were on the road. If I hadn't been afraid that you would be all broke up, I don't know that I would have run my neck into such a snarl; but then, I thought, too, that when I got near you I would be near the fellow that we want. But that man who showed me in here is too young to be the bad uncle. There's some one else in the bushes."

"Without a doubt. I have been playing a part since I found myself in their hands, and perhaps have played it too well. I wanted to give you time to get on his trail before I allowed him to fully unmask. I am fearless enough, yet there are some precautions that can be taken when dealing with such men, that are no signs of cowardice. It is time for me to get well now. I think when he hears that the fever has abated he will show himself."

"And what do you think he will be after?"

"A release in full, perhaps, signed and sealed perhaps with my life. The villain that would rob the widow and the fatherless, would not be too good to attempt it; to say nothing of the record he has been making here as a cut-throat and a robber."

"Well, we're in for it now, whatever it may be, so keep a stiff upper lip, and whatever you may do don't give me away. He may be rough on you, but he'd be perfect death on me."

"Never fear. At the best, though, I don't see how you expect to help me here."

"Never mind that. As Lorette I can get there when a larger man might fail. Don't forget my name; and let on that I'm doing you a heap of good. The man, woman or child that pinned their faith to Sonny Sharp never knew him to go back on 'em."

Then the little detective began to look sharply about him, to see what manner of place he had dropped into.

It was more like a den than anything else.

There was a little, natural *cul-de-sac*, surrounded by overhanging rocks, save at the narrow entrance.

It did not look as though a squirrel could climb up the face of the mountain wall, and Sonny Sharp, after a glance, mentally decided that he could not.

The place where Marion lay was a sort of alcove, and at the further side was the narrow opening, that looked like a gash in the rocks, through which was the way to the world beyond.

Sonny Sharp shook his head.

"A mighty bad line of retreat in case a fellow ought to evacuate the premises with speed and celerity. If the confounded agents had waited ten minutes longer, I'd have given Angelo the slip, and would have been prowling around up there. It would have been a heap sight easier to drop a line down from above, than it is to tie one up there from below, to say nothing of the fact that I'd rather pull the young lady up with the rope, than to climb up first and then try to pull her up after me. But if they seem inclined to crowd us, that's what I'll have to do if—Blazes! How will I get the rope up there?"

He touched his body lightly, to see if the hidden cord was still in place; and then crouched back until he looked as though, overcome with fatigue or want of rest, he had fallen asleep propped against the rock. He thought that he heard through the rift the sound of approaching steps and voices.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN HOWL AND MARION TALK BUSINESS—WITH A LARGE R.

THE sharp ears of the little detective had not deceived him. The party that was approaching halted just outside of the rift, and a few words were spoken to the man who was stationed there on guard. The tone was so low that Sonny did not catch what was said, but he had an idea that it was a password, with, perhaps, some added words of explanation, or instruction, to the sentinel.

Then, one man entered the alcove, who looked first at the crouching figure in the corner, that straightened up with a start as he came.

"Very attentive, I see," he said, in a coarse, grating tone, and motioning with his fingers.

"You get outside, young lady, until this interview is over. From what they tell me, you might not understand much of what is said, but it is just as well not to have a witness. Don't you go too far, either. That man out there will shoot."

Sonny could not have acted better up to his disguise. He tried to object, and then allowed his fright to overcome him. He glanced at Marion, then at the intruder; and then, shaking his head and hand while he muttered brokenly a

few undistinguishable words, he hurried from the spot.

The man waited until he was gone, and then turned to Marion.

He was more completely disguised than any of the road-agents she had yet seen, since not only was his face masked; but he had a cloth tied around his head in a way that entirely covered his hair. His eyes were black, and had a strangely stolid stare, though in keeping with the voice Miss Lytton had heard.

Marion was sitting up now, regarding him with an eager look.

"Glad to see you are better than they led me to suppose. Are you ready and willing to talk business? There's not much time to waste, since I have an engagement for the evening; and I'll keep it if horseflesh don't fail too soon. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Such was his gruff salutation; yet Marion was not at all disconcerted by voice or manners.

"In a court of justice they ask many questions, the answers to which are known already. This is not a court of justice, but I will answer, anyhow. I am Marion Lytton. I am tired of intrusting my affairs to those who can neither understand them, nor, if they did, would they have the courage to manage them. I am looking after you."

"You are looking at me, sure enough; but your answer explains nothing. Who is Marion Lytton; for I'll swear I never heard of her before you came on the carpet? I would have supposed that you were some crazy fool, and let it gone at that, but there was such a devilish method in your madness that I had to take care of myself. When a handsome woman like yourself offers a thousand dollars for my capture, and stands ready to urge along the hounds, it's worse than five thousand with a governor behind it that nobody sees. You came down here after that open nonsense at Walnut Bar; put yourself right in the lion's jaws; and so the lion could do nothing better than to take you in. Unless we come to some arrangement, I am afraid that you will never go out."

"There is only one arrangement that can be made. Restitution of the fortune of which you have robbed us, the return of the papers in the case, must be made or I will haunt you to your grave."

"That's reasonable—very. Why, young lady, if the world at large should understand that Captain Howl was in the restitution business, there wouldn't be stages enough to bring the victims. I have been doing a thriving business since I opened on this trail."

"I am not talking to you as Captain Howl; let his victims look after their own interests. I am speaking now to Walter Midford, the man who robbed his brother's widow of her husband's name and fortune—and even wreaks his vengeance on their children."

"What have I got to do with Walter Midford and what that amiable gentleman seems to have been doing?"

"You are Walter Midford. You came back as soon as you heard of my step-father's death. You acted as administrator, embezzled all the personal property—thousands of it—and then vanished, taking with you the will that left to my mother the half of his vast real estate, as well as her share of his money and bonds. And not content with that, you took, too, her marriage-certificate and the baptismal certificate of my half-brother, William. Oh, you played the rascal as completely as it could be done; for before you left you notified those that might have been our friends that my mother never was Mr. Midford's wife, and that her son had no right to bear his name. A blacker lie never was framed, nor a more causeless one."

"Does seem to have been pretty rough on your mother and her family; but, to save my soul—and it needs the operation pretty badly—I can't see how you can mix me up with the affair. In one way or another I have been mixed up with the West and its development since before you were born, and all this appears to have occurred somewhere back East. You'll have to pick your flint and try it again. Now, I've got a little song to sing, and you don't want to lose a note."

"It is useless for you to try to deceive me. A detective learned from a man who once knew you well, that you were a robber and an outlaw, working the roads in this section of the country. All that I have done has been to make you show your hand. You have knotted the cord for your own neck—and unless you do justice to my mother, and her son, I'll hang you."

Miss Lytton's eyes flashed, the color came into her cheeks; in her wrath she was so beautiful that Captain Howl looked at her for a moment in admiration. When she launched at him her final threat, however, he went on, without a trace of anything but cold determination in his tones:

"Your detective has been fooling you out of your time and money. We will have him here to-night, and he will tell you that he gave you a lie out of the whole cloth. After that, we will break his neck—and perhaps yours. But here is what I wanted to say. It seems that you promised your detective—out here he is known as Dan Garland—a large sum contingently, and one thousand dollars positively."

"And he has done his work, since he has put me face to face with you. The thousand dollars are his."

"Not yet—and I hope never will be, though I am glad to know that my information was so accurate. It is evident, then, there are a thousand dollars at your disposal. It is not a large sum compared with others that I have handled, but it is worth looking after. The fact may be developed, in time, that you are good for a great deal more, and of course we will work you for all you are worth; the thousand is a fixed fact, and we intend to have it."

Marion laughed scornfully.

"I am not working for wealth—though, as my mother's daughter, you have defrauded her and me out of thousands. I am not even working for revenge. It is to show who she is; and who my brother is. When there was no one else to do it—"

"Then, I am to understand that this half-brother is not large enough to look after his own interests? If he was, he would hardly allow you, a young woman, to undertake a mission, the dangers of which are too great for even you to appreciate."

"My brother seems to have been only too ready to accept the general belief that he has been defrauded without remedy. He has nothing to do with me or my effort. As to the dangers—I am willing to meet and face them all. When I have got this far do you think I can be frightened or forced from my course? You will never get the thousand dollars; and my threat still holds good. Right us as Walter Midford, or I will hang you as Captain Howl—even if I cannot bring home to you in your right name dark enough crimes to draw the rope."

The captain regarded her curiously.

"I really believe you would be dangerous if you could; for of all perilous people commend me to your fool in his, or her, wrath. I think, perhaps, it will be well if you are never heard from again, back East. You have been showing your hand with a vengeance, while, so far, I have not opened mine. I have been curious to get to the bottom of facts as you see them, so that I could understand you and your quest, and what the chances were for a good haul. I am not sure that I have heard everything I would want to hear, but there has been enough said to justify me in saying that unless your tone is altered very materially, you will never go away from here. Think over this seriously, and to-night, when I come to interview your detective in your presence, have your answers ready. I intend to have no nonsense; and it will be the last time of asking."

"Perhaps you would say what you intend to say now. It will give me the longer to reflect!"

For answer he simply shook his head and turned away.

From the outset Marion had listened closely, for, disguised as he was, the most probable way in which she could recognize him again would be by his voice.

But that never changed through the whole conversation. Marion was compelled to admit that he had kept it as thoroughly disguised as his face. Little as he seemed to think she could work him any harm he was taking no chances.

He did not know the danger he was in, either; and it might have been the worse for him if he had not been so altogether unconscious. Marion was not an assassin, yet she felt a momentary but a wild desire to shoot him down as he walked away. Her hand was very near her revolver. The weapon was a small one, and might not have slain at once—though she did not know that—but at the distance, and if she had shot him fairly in the center of the back, as she yearned to, it could scarce have helped but make a fatal wound.

But she held her hand, and he passed unharmed into the rift, while Marion sunk back, her hands over her eyes, to think over the results of the interview.

That this man was Walter Midford, she did not have a shadow of a doubt; but what proof had she gained; and how should she recognize him if she met him again, and elsewhere?

Scarcely had she asked herself the question when all thoughts of any answer were driven entirely out of her mind by the tumult that arose, just beyond the narrow passageway through which Captain Howl had disappeared.

First she heard the shouting of several voices, and then the quick rattle of firearms.

She thought of the little detective at once; and it hardly took instinct to tell her that he had been found out. With sharp anxiety for his fate she sprung from her couch and rushed toward the rift, only to meet him as he came bursting in. He held a revolver in either hand, and a carbine was slung on his shoulder. Wheeling at the threshold he pointed the pistols down the rift, and stood at bay.

CHAPTER XIII.

SONNY SHARP RAISES A FULL HAND.

SONNY SHARP was a little fellow, but he had courage for a dozen, and went on the supposition that life was a joke, and he might as well laugh as anybody else.

He was an adept at disguise, and knew that he changed his appearance so skillfully that he

had very little thought of detection, so long as he kept his wits about him. If he could impose on Angelo with his story about having been separated from his companions, and all that, he had no doubts about the rest. If he had thought that he would be called upon to roam in the mountains, or be a prisoner to the road-agents, he would have doubtless preferred to pose as an Italian boy. As it was too late to change, he went along with the two *bona fide* musicians without hesitation.

The scheme of Marion to feign sickness to obtain opportunity for observation and the like, no doubt served him some trouble; but if he had cared only for himself, it is more than likely he would have been able to remain undiscovered until the road-agents released the party.

But Sonny Sharp was possessed with the knowledge that, for the present, Marion Lytton was his employer, and demanded his time and attention.

He would have dearly loved to overhear the interview between Captain Howl and his prisoner. He made an effort in that direction, and very nearly got shot for his pains. When he lingered near what might be called the doorway, the guard, who was a man of very few words, raised his carbine.

Perhaps he was not going to shoot, but there was no certainty. Sonny exclaimed imploringly in broken Italian, or, at least, in very bad English, and moved to what appeared to be a satisfactory distance on the other side of the sentinel.

In the distance he could hear the harp and violin, and occasional laughter. The outlaws off duty were evidently utilizing their captives. Near him, the only fellow in sight was this guard, who seemed entirely without suspicion, but very wide awake.

If Sonny had been desirous of trying to make his own escape, he might have made the effort now, although, so far as he could see, the only probable outlet to the canyon was beyond the spot where the outlaws appeared to be encamped. The little *cul de sac* in which Marion was confined, was at the head of the gorge which lay before him, a long and rather narrow oval.

He took all this in without the sentry ever suspecting how intently he was studying the lay of the land, and jotted it down in his mind for future reference.

At length the interview was over, and Captain Howl came hastily out.

He stopped long enough to speak a word or so to the sentinel, and then strode over to Sharp, who was sitting with his face in his hands, pretty much as he had been when Howl first made his appearance.

The captain caught him by the chin and gave his head a quick, upward turn. He wanted to see what this Italian girl looked like, and judge whether she would be of any value to him in furthering his plans with Marion.

He might as well have wakened up a sleeping wild-cat—or so for the moment it seemed to him.

Sonny gave a feminine-like cry of indignation, and sprang at him, clawing as he came.

It was a cat-like effort, and the nails of the little detective left a long scratch on the side of the captain's neck.

"I've got you marked!" was his thought, as he shrunk back again, and quivering as if with rage at what might be interpreted as an insult.

Howl raised his hand as if to strike, but the blow did not follow.

"A regular tigress!" he muttered, "but she might make a good watch-dog if she could be trusted. Ah! Who are you? By heavens! you are no woman!"

It was instinct, intuition, or something or other, that flashed over him. Sonny was a consummate actor on all ordinary occasions, but somehow he missed his cue just then. If he had kept his fingers off of the captain's neck, he might have tried to brazen it out, but he felt that while Howl was smarting from that little scratch, his aroused suspicions could not easily be quieted. He was in for rough handling, and was certain, at the least, to lose the revolvers that so far no one had ever thought of searching him for. As Howl made a spring, expecting to catch Sonny by the collar, the latter dodged under his arm, and wheeling, pitched himself at the captain in a blow in which fist, shoulder and body went all together.

Sonny was small, but when he hit fairly from the shoulder it always seemed as though he weighed a ton. His fist went home with a sharp spat, and the outlaw chief dropped on his knees, and then fell forward. If the blow had been an inch lower down it would have been very apt to have broken the captain's neck.

Over the prostrate figure Sonny jumped lightly, his hands filling with revolvers as he went, and he ran straight toward the rift in the rocks behind which Marion was confined.

The sentinel was in the way, and he could have dropped him with a snap-shot before the carbine was aimed, but sharp did not care to arouse the camp a moment before it was necessary. He kept his eye on him, and dropped just as the finger seemed to press the trigger.

The bullet whistled closely, but did no harm, and as the shot must arouse the men below,

Sonny Sharp hesitated to longer to use his own weapons.

The sentry dropped his carbine with a howl of dismay, and the blood spouting from his arm. As he instinctively reached for the weapon, Sharp's clubbed revolver struck him on the head, and he was felled to the ground.

Sonny snatched up the gun and looked over his shoulder. There was a yell in the distance, and near him Captain Howl was making the first movement toward regaining his feet. There was little time to lose.

Had it not been for the captain, the men coming to the rescue might have made it exceedingly warm for him; but they had to wait until he was not quite so fairly in the range. While they waited, and still ran on, Sonny dodged in to the rift, and was lost to their sight.

"It's all up with me, I reckon, if they get me," he said to Marion, though never once looking in her direction.

"But don't you forget that I marked him with my finger-nails, just under the left ear, and if you find him soon enough there will be something 'most as big as a goose-egg on the back of his neck. If you could find those two together on any man in Blue Blazes you might swear to his being Captain Howl and not make any mistake."

"But you—what are you going to do?"

"Stand them off as long as I can, and try and make terms, or get out of this. If it was only getting down, I'm all fixed with rope enough to save 'most any kind of a tumble. But for climbing—blame me if I ever could fly, and it looks as though that was what's the matter. Hist! Here comes one of them now."

A figure came scrambling along the passage, and Sonny's finger was on the trigger, but he dropped the muzzle as Jocko ran by him chattering, evidently pretty badly frightened by what was behind him.

"They think they have me in a box anyhow, and they'll take account of damages before they come for me solid. Maybe they will slip up on it anyhow."

Of course he could not see much of what was going on, but he could guess pretty closely. The captain had been a little slow about getting up, and they were gathered around him, waiting to see what was the matter. There was no need of haste, since there was no other outlet to the *cul-de-sac* into which the detective had plunged; and undue haste might injure seriously the young lady their captain had been at so much pains to carry away. They wanted his orders before they began any promiscuous firing.

Sonny came to the conclusion that his ears would tell him if anything better than his eyes when the advance was renewed, and so took time to look around him.

And scarcely had he turned his head when he uttered an exclamation of delight, and darted to the side of the rock of wall just in time to get his fingers on the monkey.

"Here, Jocko, you're intelligence itself. If you can get that far up there's no reason why you shouldn't go clear to the top. If you can you can help me out of a thundering bad scrape—if you will. See that tree up there old man?"

A stubby little cedar grew out of a cliff, some fifty feet above them. It was more of a bush than a tree, but it looked strong enough for his purpose, and stood at the foot of the practicable ground. If he had the hook on the cord he had provided to assist him in his researches once fast up there he believed he could scramble up himself.

Hastily he produced the cord looking cordially at the monkey while he spoke.

Jocko seemed to recognize him as some one he had seen before, in the company of Angelo, and consequently a possible friend. He followed the motion of Sonny Sharp's finger as it pointed toward the cedar above, and noted curiously the hook that was afterward held up. Then the detective slipped the hook several times around the barrel of the captured carbine before he put it into the monkey's paws.

"Up you go, old man," continued the Sonny, cheerfully, as he placed Jocko at the spot whence, a moment before, he had dragged him.

"And you want to git thar, Eli, in rapid style to do me any good. These educated monks generally know all about climbing and a rope; but they sometimes take their own time. How is it, Miss Lytton? Can you hear them coming?"

Marion watched the monkey climbing upward, with breathless attention, and shook her head by way of a noiseless negative.

Jocko's progress was slow. From a convenient perch he occasionally grinned and chattered, and he was not half-way up to the roots of the cedar when Sonny Sharp heard them calling for him pretty loudly.

"You, in there. Don't be silly. We are bound to have you if we try, but there's no use to have any bones broken over it. If you are the party you say you are I swear we will do you no harm. You didn't understand what was meant, and had a perfect right to defend yourself. If you are a fraud we can't have you in there with our prisoner. Come out here with your hands up and explain yourself. And if you don't come out yourself, in one minute I'll

the clock we'll come in and bring you out. You hear me."

"Yessa, Lorette heara plain. Waita."

A brief conversation followed in an undertone between the men without, while the man within gave a glance upward and then mentally clapped his hands. Jocko had hung the book on the cedar, and then quietly vanished.

"If you think that you can climb up the rope, all right. Go ahead! If not, I'll shin up first, and then pull you up."

"Save yourself. I have decided to wait for more light. This man has, so far, only half unfolded his scheme, and to-night I am to learn the rest."

"All right. You may do as you choose; but I can't wait."

They both spoke hurriedly, and Sonny's hands were on the rope during his final speech. He tried the cord, was sure it was fast, and then began the ascent, bracing his feet firmly against the rocks, while he raised himself with his hands.

CHAPTER XIV.

A HARD LITTLE MAN TO HOLD.

IT was not likely that the outlaws would hesitate very long. In spite of the hard hitting and quick shooting of the young musician it was not yet certain that she or he was not a woman. And these men were not of the kind to be held at bay by a woman; and a rush might be expected at any moment. Still, Sonny Sharp took his chances of being caught on the rope, where everything would be against him, and climbed desperately up.

If he could only gain the little ledge where the cedar grew, he would be in a better position than in the *cul-de-sac* he had just left. From there he could command the rift with his revolvers, and if the road-agents wanted slaughter he could give it to them—for a time pretty much all on one side. But till he could leave his rope they had him at their mercy.

Luck was in his favor—as usual. It had seemed a very long time, both to him and to Marion; but scarce a minute had elapsed from the time that he had answered the challenge to come out until he crouched breathless on the little ledge, and coolly drew up his rope. If Marion would not use it, he might find it handy to have about him later on.

Hardly had he secured the cord when he heard again the order to surrender, and this time there were no qualifications about it. Only, Captain Howl coupled with it an awful threat of what he would do in case anything happened to the other prisoner through his folly of resistance.

Of course Mr. Sharp remained discreetly silent. He had already motioned to Marion to get out of the range of either his or the outlaws' revolvers, and he intended to have the benefit of the surprise if possible.

Marion looked upward, and divining his intentions she spoke for him.

"Hold, there, a moment! I am averse to bloodshed, as yet, but I swear to you that if you attempt to enter here, there will be plenty of it spilt. I cannot prevent it, nor shall I try. This person, whoever she is, is heavily armed, and seems determined to sell her life as dearly as possible. It is for your own sakes I am speaking."

"You keep yourself out of the road and we'll settle with him. Throw yourself flat on the ground, and stay there till the shooting is over!"

Then there was a rush through the rift, and two or three men made their appearance, with their weapons raised to shoot, and looking eagerly around.

"I'm not renowned for being tender-hearted," muttered Sonny, as he raised his pistols, "but blame me if I can shoot to kill. And they always say in war one wounded man is as good as two dead ones. But they are getting it, all the same."

Sharp was as cool as they make them, and was putting his bullets just about where he wanted them. When a man is not in too great a hurry he can do a great deal of shooting in a very short time, and for such an expert as he was, with a six in either hand, it was easy enough to put in three shots before they had him located.

He hit his man every time, and badly enough to make him spring back into cover. There never was a neater bit of work gotten in on them since Captain Howl organized his gang.

Sonny saw them retreat with much satisfaction. If they had fallen forward it would have opened the way for the second column to try their hand, or investigate into what was the matter. This way his victims blocked the road, and were there, besides, to answer questions. He had already marked out the course he intended to follow; and, so soon as he had fired his third shot, the detective once more struggled upward. The way was not now so difficult, and there was a large boulder, not twenty feet above him, that would give him cover. If he could reach that before another charge was made he rather thought he could defy the whole band to catch him from below.

Luck was really more in his favor than he knew.

Not half an hour before a detachment had left on a special mission, and there were not

enough men left on duty to throw away many lives carelessly. As yet it was not suspected that the fugitive had sealed the rocks, and so there was no need for haste in the minds of the bandits; half a dozen of whom were grouped around the wounded men.

"How long would it take two of you to scramble up above and pick him off? It's a man, you can bet. No girl could sling lead that fast, and make it count every time."

Captain Howl had got over his first black passion, and was willing to go slow and sure.

"Bout half an hour, captain. It ain't no fool of a tramp. Ef Rank—he's on ther lookout up on ther top station—heard that shootin' he may come down ther hog back, an' take a clip at him anyhow."

"Better to lose a little time than two or three men, in doing the same thing. There is no use to count on Rank, either. He wouldn't leave his post if he knew the whole outfit was being taken in. One of you keep an eye open here, that he don't have a chance to make a break, and two go around and pot him from above. Take no chances, but kill him dead."

The sound of a distance pistol-shot came to their ears. The direction of the sound was not very certain, but it seemed to come through the rift, and from above.

"Thar's yer Rank now!" exclaimed the outlaw, who had answered the captain's question.

"Bet yer a dollar he's spotted ther gerloot, an' got in his work. I'm goin' ter take ther risk an' see."

Without waiting for further permission he drew his revolvers and dashed into the alcove.

He found Marion crouching in one corner, as though dumb with terror; and otherwise the place was tenantless.

His shout brought the rest in; Captain Howl coming first of all.

He took in the situation at a glance. Approaching Marion, he caught her roughly by the shoulder.

"Here, girl, what is the meaning of this? Where has he gone to?"

"How should I know? Who do you mean? Oh, that cruel shooting! Take me away from it!"

No information was there to be gained from Miss Lytton, and they gained none in any other direction, so that, as there was not the first sign that the fugitive had ever been there, his disappearance became a matter of no little mystery.

Of course there was little doubt, after her late defiance, but what Marion was playing a part now; but it would be hard to force her to speak, and it might very well be that she knew no more than they did, if she had been in her present position long.

"He could hardly have scrambled up the rocks," said the captain, looking upward. "I think I know what is to be done in that direction as well as the next man, and I should say it couldn't be done."

"Whar's that blamed monkey?" asked one of the men, looking keenly around in search of Joeko.

"I'll swear he came in here, and he ain't here now. Ther dog-blasted critter hez jumped up ther rocks an' then let his tail down fur ther gal ter climb out by."

"Right you are," answered the captain, catching at the spirit of the idea.

"The monkey was at the bottom of it some way, for no living man could get out of here unaided in the time he had to do it in. The big question now is, did he get Rank, or has Rank got him. Off, two of you, and find out! If it's a detective we've been fooling with we've made a mighty bad break. He will be half-way to Blue Blazes before we strike the trail. And we're too short-handed to follow him in force."

There was little delay in following out these suggestions. The two men selected for the duty started at once to find out the fate of Rank—or his fortune, if he had any. Two others went toward Blue Blazes, to intercept the fugitive if possible; while the captain, who had already given more time to the affair than he felt he had to spare, made one more fruitless effort to extract from Marion some information in regard to the escaped captive, and then left the camp in great haste. That the few men remaining there would keep an extra keen watch was as certain as that they fully understood the danger this escape might bring them into.

Pressed though he felt himself for time, Captain Howl made a slight *detour*, for the purpose of finding out the truth in regard to the sentinel above, at whom, or by whom, the single shot they had heard, was fired.

At this particular moment a horseman was dashing recklessly down the mountain-side, in the direction of Blue Blazes, and the horseman was our little detective friend, Sonny Sharp.

He had followed the regular trail over these mountains but once, yet he had kept his eyes about him as he went, and knew the lay of the land better than many a man who had passed through dozens of times. When he emerged from the well-like depression at the head of the canyon, he took a glance at the sun and then at his watch, put his thinking cap on for a moment, and instinct told him right where he was.

It was not just so easy to pick out a path to the trail—he had good reason to believe that at best the way would be tolerably difficult—but again instinct, or luck, befriended him, and he took his way along a narrow ridge, which, for the present, tended upward.

He had not followed this very far before he came upon the sentinel, Rank, at the "upper station."

He was looking for some such meeting; only, it came a little sooner than he really expected—and a good deal sooner than Rank had any idea of. The gaze of the outlaw was turned downward, directly toward the camping-ground, and the first intimation he had of the presence of the stranger was the sharp order:

"Hands up and empty! I guess I've got you foul."

"Guess not!" was Rank's retort as he tossed up his carbine, his right thumb forcing back the hammer as the barrel fell into his left hand.

At that Sonny fired—and for keeps. He had given fair warning; and he saw it was death to lose the drop.

Down dropped the road-agent. The bullet had gone through and through, and his future chance in the game of life had very little value.

"Sorry, my friend, but you would have it so. Is there any ordinary thing you would like me to do for you?"

Sonny asked the question, but expected no answer.

Rank made one more futile effort to raise his gun; then fell back, with a gurgle in his throat, and was silent forever.

"That's the curse of this business," continued the detective. "But it has to be done, and it may as well be done by a man who knows how. Now then, if he has a horse I'll get to Blue Blazes ahead of the royal captain, or break a wheel."

CHAPTER XV.

TWO PLAYERS FOR ONE HAND.

"HAPPY to see you gentlemen—if you have stamps—always happy."

"Provided we behave ourselves," laughed one of the party that strolled into Hazzard Hall.

"That part I take care of myself," retorted the first speaker, her eyes flashing merrily, her pouting lips suggestive of fun; and yet something in her tones to show that her words were not entirely an empty boast.

"When they don't, they go out. Sometimes they walk, and sometimes they don't; but they always go."

"And generally without their money," suggested the same youngster who had answered her before.

Hazzard Hall was dividing the better class of business with the Lair, and of late, shrewd observers had remarked, was getting, perhaps, the lion's share. Red Hank was a good man for his business, in spite of his pseudonym; but the individual that ran the hall was more than a good man, in the eyes of Blue Blazes. Aileen Arnaugh—Miss Arnaugh as she was universally called by those who had occasion to address her by name—was a perfect revelation of female loveliness when she was sporting the feminine side of her nature. As to her methods of conducting the hall her few words already quoted explained them pretty clearly. She had to have peace if she fought for it; and her tiger bit hard when she patted it on the back. She explained all that plainly enough when she opened the place, and after that kept close to the line then marked out.

Of course a young lady of rather exceptional beauty, and who daily fingered thousands, had plenty of admirers, in spite of her profession; but so far as the camp knew, she kept them all at a safe distance.

That was something, requiring some skill, for they were of the persevering kind, and the men who gave her the greater part of her custom.

Of Miss Arnaugh's past life very little was known at Blue Blazes. As a successful sport she must have gained her experience some where, but Fancy, the night before was the first man in camp who had ever heard anything of a tangible nature in regard to her previous life.

As the reader knows, there were secrets in her life at Blue Blazes that might have surprised some of her clients had they known them; and it is to be supposed that her past life included others just as momentous, though she did not look so.

The party that strolled in this evening was led by a good sponsor. It had Colonel Wildmont at its head—though he had only lingered a moment and then passed on into the other room. Of the four other two were well enough known there, and the others two were John More and Maurice Montmorenci, two of the passengers on Long Jim's coach, the day before.

Maurice was as neat as though he had just come out of a handbox.

Early in the evening he fell in with John More, who was wandering around in an aimless sort of way; then somehow they scraped acquaintance with a couple of citizens, who hung them on to Wildmont. As the colonel was on his way to Hazzard Hall the four went along

with him, and Maurice stopped to chaff a little with the fair proprietor.

His suggestion gave more amusement than offense.

"That depends on how long they stayed with the game. Of course I'm not running the Hall to distribute a fortune. With the usual percentage, and a little extra good luck, I usually capture about all the coin that lingers within the range of my allurements. Do you count on making any permanent investments with us? If so, I think I shall hold the box myself, and put on an extra cashier."

"It would be advisable," retorted Montmorenci, daintily stroking his incipient mustache with his gloved hand.

"I confess, I prefer the blandishments of poker to the alluring fascinations of faro; but when I am in the vein I have been known to break a bank."

"Scarcely with a sledge-hammer," smiled Aileen, looking over the boyish frame with an amused smile.

"That would be too heavy for you to handle, and I am afraid you would find our safe here at the Hall more likely to turn in than turn out. And yet, it don't always do to gamble entirely on looks. If I am not mistaken, you are the young gentleman who killed the road-agent?"

"Shot him, asadum, or creased him rather. Of course I could have worked the man sudden death; but I didn't care to be too hard on him in the line of his business. It was his to take me into camp—and his to get away, if he could. I gave him his chance for both, and angels could do no more."

"You are quite a desperate little villain, I see. As far as I heard, he was not interfering with you at all—or at least the road-agents had informed you that they did not intend to trouble you of the outside. Don't you think you were a little previous in putting your oar in?"

"You forget poor Jim, and the lady in the case. You see, I travel for adventure, and when I told the story back East, what sort of a figure would I have cut in it if I hadn't done something. Why, those Howls ought to give me a gold medal, or make up a purse, in the name of my beneficent humaneness. Think what a record I might have made if I had begun sooner, and applied myself to cold business."

"I never heard that a dead boy enjoyed his record more than the average; and I think you knew when to shoot. And I think, also, that you would stand there all night, chaffing me, if I gave you the chance."

"Why not? I assure you, I consider you worth the sacrifice."

"Excuse me. The sacrifice would all be on one side, and that side mine. The Hall has not got to be exactly a self-running machine. It takes some one to look after the wheels. I won't ask you to make yourself at home—you are one of the kind that will do that anyhow—but I'll allow you to stroll around a while if you don't put on too many airs. If any one hurts you, come and tell me."

It was not often that even a stranger had as long a chat with Miss Arnaugh in business hours. Master Maurice did not seem to take affront at his unceremonious and not altogether flattering dismissal; nor did he seem aware that more than one had looked at him curiously, wondering what Aileen Arnaugh saw in him to give him so much of her time.

He strolled into the other room.

Everything was very quiet there. He could hear the soft dropping of the cards as they fell in the deals at the poker-tables, and the low voices of the players, who carried on their games with the least possible amount of conversation. As yet the faro-table was tenantless, and the dozen or so who were waiting for the dealer to spread his lay-out talked but little, and then in a guarded tone, putting him very much in mind of the conversation in the ante-room of a country church, while the congregation lingered there, waiting the appearance of the preacher.

"Somebody take my hand a minute," said a man at one of the tables. "Confound it if I hadn't quite forgot what I came for. I'll be back in no time, and you won't have more than a chance to look at the cards and say that you stay in if they're worth it till I'll be here."

"With pleasure," said Maurice, sliding into the seat from one side, as the man vacated it from the other.

"If you want a reliable man, a slow better, and one that knows the value of an ace full when he sees it, I'm at your service. Ten dollars seems to be the limit of your pile, so I can't hurt you very bad if I go dead burst before you get back."

"Well, I'll be hanged!"

The man looked the boy over as though he did not know whether to laugh or be angry, and then he walked away without another word.

"Knows the man for the place when he sees him," said Maurice, with a little satisfied nod.

"What's trumps?"

"Keno, with the queen soda," responded the individual on the opposite side of the table; "but I thought we were playing draw. I guess we'd better wait for Sam to get back. He might kick hard if we won his money while he was away."

"That's a fact," answered Maurice, shoving the little pile of chips nearer, and putting in their place a bright ten-dollar gold piece.

"There's nothing meaner than losing another man's money, unless it's to hand over your winnings, if you've had a streak. Suppose we play with mine, and when your friend comes back we can make a place for him."

"Sooner than stop the game, we might take you in while your chips last," answered the man who held the deck, and was the one who had thought Sam might kick; and he began to throw around the cards.

Master Maurice asked no more questions in regard to the trump. In fact, he seemed to understand the game as well as any of them. As the betting was not very heavy, he had no trouble in staying along with the rest. When Sam got back his ten-dollar gold piece was waiting for him, while at the wrist of the lad quite a stack of checks had accumulated.

A word or two explained the situation, which he accepted without complaint, and found himself on another seat, and a place in the game.

"Funny thing this about Belshazzar," he said, as he dropped into his chair.

"What's wrong with Brick?" asked another, as he took up the deck, and ran the ends together, after separating the cards into two even portions.

"He hasn't turned up yet, and here's this man that calls himself Four Horse Frank circulating about town as big as life, asking why he don't come to light if he has anything against him. Something ought to be done, 'most."

The dealer laid down his cards and looked up.

"If the man we made marshal don't attend to his business, I don't see that we have any call to put in, unless he calls on us. And if he goes chasing ghosts down to Muddy Fork, instead of watching for his men at home, he don't deserve to have any one help him make a stake."

"But he didn't go to the Fork at all. I guess he thought just that way himself, for he came back, and some of the boys saw him toward morning snooping around the Grand Occidental. This fellow stayed there all night; and now, what some of them are anxious for is to find the body."

"Oh, come, now. You don't mean to say that he's got away with Belshazzar that bad?"

"I don't say anything at all—but that's what some of the boys at the Lair were whispering when I ran in there. Maybe it's just because he's in with the gang at the Spotted Dog."

"Well, what are they going to do about it?"

"They haven't decided on anything yet; but if Belshazzar don't turn up soon, I wouldn't wonder if they reached for him."

"All right. Let them reach. But while they're trying to make up their minds, we'll go on playing draw. Cut, Tommy."

"All right again, but they were saying something about a young woman that came in on the stage. Long Jim says the agents tried to scoop her on the road, but this here four horse fellow helped her out."

"Well, she turned up missing this morning. There hasn't been much said about it, because they thought maybe she had just stepped out; but it begins to look curious. There's a racket of some kind coming, to give Blue Blazes a shaking up. Now go on with your deal. You've got all the news I could pick up, and you won't have to break the game to listen when somebody comes along to chin."

"You mean the young Mexican lady?" asked Maurice, who had been listening attentively.

"Who is she? There must be millions somewhere behind her, for the road-agents to follow her into a town like this. Why, the camp ought to enlist an army and follow such men to their holes, if it took a year."

"Don't be too fresh, youngster. A game like that has been tried—and the army hasn't got back yet. It's not expected as much as it was, either, since there was a brand new graveyard found up in the mountains. Unless Brick is on the trail, there won't be much going outside the limits until we know what's what. There's no Mexican with coin enough to start such a game here; and if the other end of the game is a thousand miles away, down South perhaps, let the people there look after it. That's the sentiments of Blue Blazes, as I take it. If she was gobbled last night, for any money in it, you bet she's further from here by this time than any of us would care to go in the same time."

"Oh, I'm not trying to show Blue Blazes her duty," hastily responded Maurice, as the tone of the speaker seemed to be threatening.

"I happened to see the beginning, out on the trail, and naturally feel an interest in the girl. But, as you say, I don't see that I can do anything—Chip, of course. Let's hear from the rest."

And the game went on.

The rest came in, each a little better than the last, until Maurice had to stretch his pile a little from his pocket to stay with them. Then he asked for two cards, and, pending the negotiations of the rest, tried to listen to the conversation of their neighbors, who were saying something about the disappearance at the Grand Occidental.

When everybody was suited Maurice laid an

additional ten dollars in the center, and waited. His wits looked to be wool-gathering, but in draw things are not always what they seem. Several of the next talkers were for calling him down, but the man to his right went a hundred better, and money began to climb on the table.

Just as Maurice made a raise of another hundred some one touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"I wouldn't, pard, I really wouldn't. I seen them talkin' at yer from 'way back; an' that's ther time a card-sharp gits in his work. If yer filled yer hand in ther draw I wouldn't back it wuth a cent, let erlone heapin' it up ther way you're startin' out."

It was Four Horse Frank himself who was talking, though how he got there the youth could not altogether explain.

Nor did he try to as he looked up with an angry glance.

"I thought I was playing this hand; but if you know differently it's all right. There's the cards, and there's my little fortune. Perhaps you'd like to run the two to suit yourself?"

"You bet I would. That's just my name," retorted the unabashed sport.

"As far as I'm concerned, then, try it on; but don't you begin any games on the undersigned. I'm small for my size, but I weigh a ton, and I know how to look after my wealth. Take the chair. I came in on a trade, and I'll go out the same way."

As he spoke Maurice rose from his seat, throwing back his coat-skirt as he did so, and showing the belted weapons underneath.

"Hold on!" exclaimed the man who had started the pot again to growing when he put in the hundred.

"If you want to jump the game you can throw in your cards, and your coin goes with them; but you can't wring an outsider in on us. We've stood your cheek long enough. Pass out, or keep your seat."

"Sorry fer you, young man. That's your fancy way of doin' things; but it don't work with me," retorted Frank, as he settled himself in the chair vacated by Maurice.

"I warn't yearnin' so much for a game; but now I'm in you kin figger it out that I've come ter stay. Ef you think you hed him foul mebbe you'll try a hitch at me."

Very coolly Four Horse Frank picked up the cards, and right at his back stood Maurice Montmorenci, with a brace of derringers in his hands.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CASE AS STATED.

FOUR HORSE FRANK'S hands were on the cards, but his eyes were on the man he had last addressed, apparently reading him through and through. Probably no one but this man noticed the peculiar emphasis put on the word "fancy." It was enough to convince him that he was recognized, and if the eyes of the bold sport had wandered for an instant Fancy would have shot him dead, and taken his chances with the crowd.

But he had tested this cool stranger quite thoroughly the night before, and at the same time heard Miss Arnaugh's opinion of him. Something held his hand, though his fingers were so near to the heavy sixes in his belt.

From one to the other Fancy looked, unable to decide whether this could simply be chance, or whether the plot had all been arranged beforehand.

"So yer thinks yer won't try it?" added Frank, as he saw the almost imperceptible change that took place in Fancy's face.

"Quite right, me hearty! It ain't wuth while litterin' up ther floor with on'y two corpses. An' it might make nasty work 'splainin' just what ther trouble war, an' why you war so ready ter chip. Ther pint are: yer can't bluff me, not very bad, an' I ain't a boy ter be skeered out, er run over. Jest go on with yer rat-catchin', an' Four Horse Frank'll stay with yer tell ther bottom drops out."

"We'll go on when this thing's settled," retorted Fancy, a little more coolly in tone, but with hot wrath in his eyes.

"You've as much as said that we're going to cheat the lad. If you meant that, speak it out plainly. If you didn't—beg! They hang the man that cheats at Hazzard Hall, and they shoot the man that starts the cry and can't back it up with proof. The bantam may have his irons out, and you be ready to shoot, but this game don't go a hand further until we settle with you. You said we were going to cheat the boy—no squirming now; prove it, or do the other thing."

"I'm watchin' your hands, an' you're watchin' mine, so ez thar ain't no shenanigin on our side. You hed all ther chance ter fix ther papers afore I come inter ther game. Now, the boy owns ther wuth ov his hand. Count ther deck ez it lays an' then you kin whoop it up ez high ez yer wants ter raise an' ther ready John'll be hyer to kiver it. Last time ov askin'. Make ther pot good, go better, er we'll take ther stakes."

Four Horse Frank did not bluff worth a cent, and the way he stated the case showed that he intended to keep the points in his favor as much

as possible. The fact was, though they might drive the intruder out—if they could—Maurice Montmorenci's money could not well be taken except on the show of a square hand; while he seemed to have the right for a chance at theirs.

And as the boy had come into the game in a somewhat irregular manner, without much objection on their part, it was a question after all whether any one but Montmorenci had anything to say.

If the sport had ever raised his voice above the low, conversational key at which it was originally set, the little controversy might have drawn attention to what was going on, and the rush of spectators given a chance to get somewhere near even terms with the intruders. As it was, Frank had been as discreet as though he always lived there. As the fair proprietor herself had just spread the lay-out to begin the first deal of the evening, that might have had something to do with the unmolested way in which they were allowed to continue their little discussion.

The proposition to count the cards was the worst offense of all. There was a suspicion in the mind of Fancy that perhaps there was a better hand against him than he thought for, and counting would cut him out of his sure thing, if it did no more. He could not use the cards he had been holding out, even if he succeeded in getting them back into the deck without discovery. He felt that he had got himself into a box, out of which he saw but two ways. He could call, and submit to be beaten on his hand as he held it; or he could go in to fight it out, with the chances against him unless some of the rest would help him over the ripple.

And that last was just what no one cared to do. Fancy was not a popular man, and fortunately for the sport none of the others belonged to the gang with which the desperado had been training the previous evening. They were watching the proceedings like hawks, and right there their interest stopped.

"If the boy was out of the road," said Fancy, after just a flash of thought, "I'd soon settle with you. But he's got to have a sight for his money first, and then we can have our little picnic. If the rest want to be in, or if they want to fight it out on your line—that's their say so, and I'm waiting on them. When it gets around to me I'm going to see him; and if the cards call for it he can take the money. After that—"

He frowned darkly, and only a blind man could have misunderstood the threat.

"I'll call," said the nearest man on the right, and in an unhesitating way he made his words good from his purse.

The example was followed by the rest, with general alacrity of manner, showing that there were some good hands out all around.

"That's the way for the game to go. No foolin' in that, but just solid old business. I don't say that we've ther biggest hand I ever see, but it's big ernuff ter lay a neat little pile on. There she is, an' she speaks fur hisself. Ef ary one else can show better he takes the pot an' we don't whimper."

The cards were lying on the table in front of him, their backs up. Very deliberately, and one at a time, he turned them over. As he did so Fancy cast a stealthy look at Maurice.

That astute young gentleman had him as thoroughly lined as the most expert dead-shot in camp would have arranged it under the circumstances. Fancy could see that the muzzle was looking straight at him, and the weapon was invisible to any one else.

Then he looked over at the cards that Four Horse Frank had turned up, and he saw that there were four tens and a king in the hand. That laid over his three of a kind that he held, and there wasn't the ghost of a chance to get up the other jack from under his knee.

"Good, for me," said one after the other, throwing his cards to the center until all had spoken.

Then, when they were expecting to see him draw in the stakes, Four Horse Frank made a sudden spring, caught Fancy by hip and shoulder, and with one tremendous wrench swung him into the air and brought him down on the table, back uppermost.

"I sed somethin' 'bout countin' them keards. Ef yer do, I'll go yer three ter one ther yer only finds three ov them jacks in ther deck. Ef ye'r blamed anxshus 'bout ther other one, thar she are, under his knee. I knowed she war thar, but I war bound ter see it. No, yer don't, Fancy; it's yer uncle Frank hez hold ov yer now, an' it's no use ter wiggle."

The attack was just in time to forestall one that Fancy intended to make. By good luck it brought the fourth jack to light in such a way that there could be no question as to where it came from. At the same time, it was not done without making a noise. Fancy came on the table with a crash that turned a score of faces toward that corner of the room, and Miss Arnaugh looked up from her silver box.

Her voice did not seem to be raised above its ordinary tones, and yet it penetrated to every corner of the room.

"A moment there, gentlemen! All differences of opinion are to be settled out of doors. I never call attention to this rule twice."

"Not a difabitterence ov opinion, marm. He knowed he hed ther odd jack onder his knee, an' I warsure ov it, an' war jest showin' how ther thing worked. Easy now, pard. I'm goin' ter let yer loose. She hez yer lined, an' ef you begins ter show fight she'll begin ter show shoot, ter say nothin' ov what I'll be doin'. Easy, now. An' up she goes."

Without any perceptible effort he lifted the unfortunate Fancy, turned him over in the air very much as though he was a professional gymnast, and brought him up on the table in a sitting posture. Then he stepped back a pace or two, and with his hand on his hip and a smile on his face, stood watching his man.

Aileen made a motion to the cappers and then stepped toward the table.

"What's all this about? You gentlemen; is there anything in this charge of there having been something funny about this jack business?"

"Not a word," said Fancy, springing to his feet, and his hand dropping to his revolver as he glared around in search of his tormentor, unmindful of the fact that he stood right at his back.

"The black thief rung himself into the game and put up the job. Where is he? I'll have it out with him on the Square, or the boys will take a chance at him for a neck-tie party for shooting at my back."

"That's enough from you. Some one that saw the game speak up. How was it? The Hall runs on the Square or not at all?"

The man known as Sam, first winced a little uneasily under her glance, and then responded:

"The sport, and the youngster there, got the pot as their cards called for it, and the rest of us didn't show out—it weren't no use—but there was something funny about the way that jack was sticking to his knee. I'd say the best plan would be to let them go out of doors and shoot it out. I guess the best man will show up when the fun is over; and the best man is what we are after in a hank like this."

"We can't stop two gentlemen, or a dozen, from going out. We don't own all outdoors. But we do own the Hall, from the ground up; and till this thing is settled between them we don't want to see them air their graces in here. You hear me remark, gentlemen?"

"You needn't be shouting! That's just the kind of a sociable I've been trying to coax him to, all along. I'm going now, and if he has such a thing as sand about his craw he can follow and show it."

Fancy strode away as though he wouldn't stop for the Queen of Spain, yet he lingered a moment at the middle doorway. It seemed that Maurice Montmorenci had a word to say.

"Excuse me, but don't it strike somebody that this is my circus? I may not know much about draw poker—it's a business by itself if you want to follow it—but I do know something about shooting; and I calculate to do my own. If the gentleman going out won't run quite so fast I'd like to arrange the terms of our engagement."

"You confounded little rat!" exclaimed Aileen, with an air of disgust.

"I expected you would make trouble, the moment I saw you here. Such kids always do. If you can't keep out of mischief I'll have to ask one of the gentlemen to spank you and take you home. You've raised a storm here, and that ought to be enough. Keep quiet, can't you?"

"Unfortunately I'm not put up on the keeping quiet order. Here, you! Look out for yourself. I'm coming for you, just outside. Pull when you get the chance, fer if you don't I'll drop you sure. It was me you palmed that jack under your knee fer."

"Come on all, both of you," growled back Fancy, who, in addition to his hate and fear of Four Horse Frank, felt that his record just then needed a little bolstering.

"Shoot at sight, if you want to; there's money says I'll take you both in before you leave the street."

CHAPTER XVII.

FANCY FAILS TO CONNECT, AND BELSHAZZAR LOSES EVERYTHING BUT HIS LIFE.

NEVERTHELESS, Fancy did not wait to see if his challenge was accepted on a cash basis. He flung this defiance back over his shoulder, and went his way.

"If he has any friend ez would like ter make that good fur him," said Frank, looking around, in a hesitating way, "hyer's a clean hundred dollars ez is jest dyin' fur company, an' I wouldn't mind leavin' it in some other man's hands tell this thing's settled."

"Oh, get out!" interposed Maurice. "You can put in a little time making acquaintance with the crowd: but I'm going gunning. And I don't want any bets made on me. I never killed a man for money yet, and I'm not going to begin now. Stand aside, there, and let me at him."

The youth gave such a flourish with his voice and arms that something like a laugh was started, and under its cover he got half-way to the door before Aileen had time to exclaim:

"Here, you! Stop! There won't be any jok-

ing if you take the street. He's mad enough to hold plumb center fer an angel. It wants a man to go out there now—and come back again. Stop him, somebody! He'll have a bullet through his head before he goes a yard."

Miss Arnaugh was just too late. As she spoke, Maurice vanished through the door; and though several of her friends sprung forward, he had passed through the outer room by the time they had commenced to move.

And then they heard outside three shots in rapid succession.

"There's a dead young man," said Aileen, coldly.

"For the credit of the house I did what I could, and no one ought to blame me. I only wish he could have got further from the doorway."

"Ten ter one my pard ain't tetched, that is, bad; an' 'bout five ter two thet he keeled ther big one on ther fly. It war his bull-dog ez barked last."

No one accepted the generous offer in the general move that his words started. If Fancy was holding the street it might not be altogether safe to step through the front door, but there were enough willing to take the chance, for the sake of satisfying their curiosity.

Maurice was not nearly so simple as he looked.

When he came out of the door he stooped low, and the very instant he was in the open air he fired his first shot, in the direction of what looked as though it might be either a man or his shadow, some thirty feet away.

Then, acting on the good advice, which had not been altogether thrown away, since it led him to believe that Fancy was more than a simply good pistol-shot, he turned on his heels as on a pivot, with a swift bend changing his position completely, if only a trifle.

The movement saved his life. At the flash of his pistol Fancy raised his own weapon, and fired, the bullet hissing by the lad's ear, and burying itself in the doorpost behind him, so nearly in his line that it was really a wonder that it could have missed him at all. Yet Maurice was holding level all the time, and at the flash in the street he fired without a second's hesitation; and then sprung forward as he saw his man stumbling back.

The distance was not great, and the lad covered it in a couple of bounds.

"Let up, man, let up! Don't you see I have you foul?"

Fancy was shaking his pistol hand while an awkward sort of a curse was dropped from his lips. The heavy bullet from the boy's derringer had knocked the revolver from his grasp, badly damaging a finger or two in the operation. And yet, in an awkward sort of way, he was reaching for another weapon with his uninjured hand.

Nor did he cease the effort when the boy stood right in front of him, with his derringer leveled full in his face.

For one thing, he was so wild with pain and rage that he did not think much about what might happen to him. It was a shot at the other fellow that he was after.

Behind that, though, was the thought that the youngster would hesitate to shoot to kill until it was too late. If he had creased a road-agent and maimed him, the result of both shots could not be chance; and Fancy did not intend to be guilty of any such soft-heartedness. He shot as well with his left hand as his right; he expected Four Horse Frank out every moment; and he intended to be ready for him when he came.

Unfortunately for him the revolver he was after was the one to which his right hand naturally fell. He had left it so as a precautionary measure. Men like Frank die hard, and there was no telling what sort of a skirmish was ahead.

The fingers of his left hand gripped it at last, but it was just too late for use.

"Say, pard, ther other half belongs ter me. Stay out tell he tells me what he wants me ter do with it."

Four Horse Frank had allowed the crowd to pass out at the door, but he made use of a window. By so doing he came upon Fancy from the rear, knocking the pistol from his fingers just as he had it fairly drawn.

"Now, easy he jerks," he added as he closed in, getting one arm in his grip, pinioning the other down to his side, while he lifted him bodily from the ground and ran with him toward the door of Hazzard Hall.

"Don't yer stir a peg tell we see how bad ye'r hurt, an' I kin tie yer up. Then, ef ye'r still a hog, I'm yer man at any game ever invented."

"Skassly, skassly, my friend," interposed a voice that was not hard to recognize.

"Hands up, young man, in the name ov ther law! You've led me a purty chase; but I've got yer ag'in an this time I reckon you'll stay put, fur I ain't takin' eyes off till I know ye'r safe."

The missing Belshazzar had come to the surface again, with the drop in his hand, and was making his presence known.

"Well, gents, I'm monstrous sorry; but so it are," laughed Frank, appealing to the crowd.

"Just when I want ter show yer a leetle fun

hyer's this Sampson ov Israil allers around. Hope yer won't think it's fur lack ov nerve. But yer see I'm peaceable, law-erbiding, an' fond ov good order. When a marshal taps my shoulder I caves jest fur ther sake ov good example. Now, Belshazzar, what yer goin' ter do with yourn truly? I'll go 'long 'most anywheres; but fur settin' in that guard-house ter-night, onless you keeps me company—blest ef I'm goin' ter do it. I tried it onc't, an' I got ernuff ter last me fur ther balance ov my life."

"Reckon you'll go whar ther law takes yer, young man. But I ain't any too much in love with that shebang, meself. Ef I've got ter sot up with yer all night, ter see thet yer don't skip, I may ez well take a cheer an' be comfortable somewhar else. Ef you promises ter be 'round all right ter take ther stage fur Walnut Bar in ther mornin', I'll let yer bunk in, an git a snooze."

"Well, Belshazzar, it wouldn't take much ter promise that; but whar'll you be when ther sun rises? You're one ov ther 'Now-ye-see-me-an'-now-ye-don't-see-me' kind. Ef we're goin' ter spend ther night tergether, blamed ef I don't want some one ter be along with me, ter see whar yer goes to when yer steps out."

Some one was tying up the injured hand of Fancy, and one or two were watching the operation. The rest were all grouped around the marshal and his capture. The joke seemed to be a good one, after the experiences of the night before; and Brick was rather nettled at the way it was received.

"One of yer pards in ther ring, eh? So you could double-team ther old man?"

"Oh, no! 'Most ary feller would do, so ez he's got sand ter stay ef you begins ary ghost business. D'yer know they war talkin' 'bout me an' a rope ter-day 'cause a long-tail monkey got inter yer wool last night. Ef yer can't trot out a better one, take that chap ez I jest hed a ruction with. Ef he ain't prayin' all night, he'll be cus-sin', an' that'll keep us both awake."

The proposition was so altogether unexpected that it was just of the kind to tickle the fancy of the crowd, and puzzle Belshazzar himself.

If there were two men in Blue Blazes with whom the sport would prefer not to pass the night, it looked as though he had selected one of them; and the other had chosen himself.

"Mebbe you thinks that's a mighty good joke," said Belshazzar, shortly, "but it won't be so funny ef we take yer up on it. Reckons I hev ther power ter depytize ary man I need; an' I'm goin' ter depytize him. Frum what I heard ov this hyer row he won't be lettin' no flies settle 'round in ther neighborhood, whar him an' you is."

And the marshal was in serious earnest, though Fancy seemed inclined to dissent. Of course, every last man that had anything to say supported the bailiff; and in the end the two marched away with the prisoner. As every one by this time was more or less acquainted with the sport, or his reputation, his re-arrest made no such sensation as that of the night before.

Belshazzar had not announced the place he had chosen as his camping-ground for the night, but he led the way directly to his own cabin.

A better place he could not have found, since it was not only as strong a building as the lock-up, but it was more isolated, and less liable to be surprised from without. The furniture was rude, and the accommodation limited, but probably both jaller and jailed felt safer there than they would have done under the other roof.

"Now, Belshazzar, don't feel worried about me. I kin sleep jest anywhere. Jest you watch our friend an' brother, Fancy, hyer, ter see thet he don't stick a knife inter ther back ov yourn truly, while he's sleepin', or some sich foolishness, an' I guess everything 'll move along, comfortable ez you please. I've no time fur talk ez I'm snoozin' ter make up fur lost dates. Good-night, old man. I'm off."

Without waiting for an answer Frank settled back in his seat, closed his eyes, and if appearances went for anything was soon in the land of dreams. As Belshazzar had neglected to handcuff him, perhaps he thought that was the best way to make the omission permanent. Brick looked as though he intended to speak; but evidently thought better of it, and allowed him to remain undisturbed. The unfortunate Fancy threw himself down in a corner with a growl, and quiet settled down on the cabin without an effort.

This sort of thing lasted for some hours. Everything seemed quiet within the cabin, and there was no sign of any curious loiterers without. Nevertheless some one must have had an eye on the place, since an alarm of fire rung through Blue Blazes, and half the town was rushing to the spot just as the flames came bursting through the roof.

By the time the first man was there the flames had covered the whole building, and it was pretty certain that if any one was inside it was hardly worth while to invite him to come out. What had become of Four Horse Frank and his guards?

That was the question asked all around, for in some way or other it was generally known that the marshal had turned his cabin into a tem-

porary jail, and had taken up his quarters there for the night.

For some little time there was no answer and it began to look very much as though the trio had perished in the fire.

It was only when there was a general outcry, to tear the cabin down, or do something to determine the fate of the unfortunate men, that Belshazzar Brick slowly raised himself from the ground, a dozen rods or so away, and staggered into the crowd, looking around him like a man half awakened from sleep.

"The men, Belshazzar, whar's the men?" shouted half a hundred voices.

"Blame me, if I know what yer talkin' ov. Ain't they in thar?"

As he spoke he pointed into the roaring sea of fire with a wavering hand, while the dazed, uncertain look deepened on his face, until he suddenly covered it with his arms, and leaned on the shoulder of the nearest bystander.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE THE FIRE.

Of course Four Horse Frank was not inside of the cabin; though until very early the next morning there were plenty that believed that he was, and some that refused to be convinced when a careful search revealed no charred bones, nor any other ghastly mementoes of the vanished sport.

There was a mystery about it, and bets ran about even that night at the saloons.

Some thought that Belshazzar had found his chance, and fearing that the law would not do his man justice, got away with him, of necessity including Fancy in the operation.

Others held to the belief that Four Horse Frank had played the winning cards, finishing up by carrying Fancy bodily away.

Both parties held to their opinions so firmly that Maurice Montmorenci, who had gathered in the stakes on the table at the Hall, when the racket was at its height, and was consequently 'way ahead of the game, laid considerable money out at odds that they were all wrong. He could have got reasonable odds if he had not insisted on seeing all moneys in the hands of a stakeholder, and the Blue Blazes sports always did hate such a lock-up of coin.

Of course there was a good deal of nosing around in search of any trail from the cabin, or any suspicious signs that might be discovered; but the hurrying feet that had rushed thitherward from all quarters had obliterated anything of the kind, if it ever existed. Even Belshazzar, who had no explanation whatever to offer, had no idea which way to turn to solve the mystery. And as general report connected a twenty-thousand dollar reward with it, there was an unusual amount of interest in the matter, even for those outside of the ranks of the bettors.

If Maurice had found it necessary to name his favorite instead of taking the field, he would have picked out Fancy; and would have been only about half right. Fancy assisted; but if he had been left to his own devices would have been there safe enough when morning dawned.

Four Horse Frank was one of those happily-constituted mortals who can go to sleep whenever they want to, and without any provocation at all. He could also determine in advance on the moment of his waking.

He would not have trusted his throat within the reach of Fancy's knife if the two had been alone together, so long as he could help it. He was aware that the man had more than one reason for hatred, and that he was not of the kind to hold his hand if he saw the chance for red work.

But he had no fear of any combination being formed between his guards; and as long as they were both awake he felt reasonably safe. What he wanted was to get in his own rest before the one or the other of them went to sleep. He had been relieved of the revolver that Miss Arnaugh had so kindly furnished him, while the bailiff and his deputy were both heavily armed.

Fancy had thrown himself sulkily down, without any intention of helping Belshazzar a particle more than he had to.

Under ordinary circumstances, he would have been snoring himself, in five minutes by the clock.

His hand pained him, however; that and reflections concerning Master Maurice and the prisoner made him as wide awake as he ever was in his life, though he tried to dissemble his condition. He was in no humor to talk to either the marshal or the captive, and his thoughts gave him sufficient occupation.

At the end of a couple of hours this state of affairs began to grow wonderfully monotonous.

Frank was still sleeping serenely, while Belshazzar, his revolver in his hand, sat with his stool tipped back against the wall near the open window, his eyes never leaving him for an instant.

From between his half-closed lids, Fancy began to watch the marshal.

"Maybe I'll have a chance to get even after all," he was thinking.

"Captain Howl is very good pay, but I'm getting more than half tired of the racket, and if I saw the chance I wouldn't mind jumping Howl, the business, and the camp altogether.

There will be a break-up soon, sure. Howl must stick by me, but he may find the contract too heavy to carry; and then, were would I come in at? I half believe this is all a put-up job. Maybe this Four Horse Frank is a prisoner; but just suppose he's told Belshazzar about the little adventure of last night, and they are wanting to freeze onto me. It strikes me they've got me now. I thought of that at the Hall, and I wouldn't have come along if they hadn't had all the town behind them, and the captain signing for me to go. Suppose I draw and see how the land lays. If there's no more outside, I could drop them both, and get away before the town arrived."

About in this way the current of Fancy's thoughts was running, when he suddenly became conscious of a face at the window.

It sent a little thrill through him, because the face was masked after the fashion of the men of Captain Howl; and he felt almost certain that Brick would detect its presence. He braced himself, mentally, for work, and looked more keenly than ever at the marshal.

Was it possible that Belshazzar slept?

Brick's eyes were open, and set watchfully on the prisoner, but never a muscle moved, his attitude being almost painfully rigid. From long-continued watching he had unconsciously almost succeeded in mesmerizing himself.

The man at the window knew nothing of this; but he saw that Belshazzar was very quiet, and just fairly within his reach. He drew his head away for a moment, and then returned.

This time he had a noosed rope in his hand. With a quick, underhand fling, he cast it over Belshazzar's head, and then tightened it suddenly by throwing himself backward, bracing his feet firmly against the wall as the strain on the rope told him that he had caught his fish.

Fancy did not doubt that he saw the whole scheme just then. The marshal was to be choked into insensibility, the prisoner killed, and probably he was to be left behind as evidence that the two men had slain each other.

If he had not been afraid of the noise, he might have finished the work as he saw it. As it was, he bounded at the prisoner like a tiger, a clubbed pistol in his hand, and struck what he meant to be a crushing blow at his head.

"Oh, no! I wouldn't do it at all, Fancy. There's a little life in the old man yet, and when the time comes you always find him wide-awake. Let up, man, until we see what they're going to do with poor Belshazzar."

Fancy had not thought of any possibility of failure, and so was not holding himself together to receive this counter attack. The one hand of Four Horse Frank received his wrist as it came down; the other sunk into his opposite shoulder, and he was once more in that terrible grip that he was beginning to know so well.

At the same time Frank had about all he wanted to do to hold his captive. He might have killed him in the first place, but unfortunately that was not a safe thing to do at all. No doubt there were enough outside to prevent his escape afterward, and if Blue Blazes found him with a corpse or so on hand, his elevation was a pretty sure thing. It would not require a trial at all to bring out the facts in the case.

No doubt, as long as he had Fancy for a hostage, he could temporize with those without, though he had little doubt that they had come to slay.

Belshazzar began to hang limply against the wall. The choking was entirely too much for him. He had not determined what was the matter before he lapsed into insensibility.

The man at the other end of the rope could not see what was going on within, and wanted to make no mistake in regard to the marshal. He held on for some time after he felt the last kick, and ran the risks of a corpse that he had no use for. It was Frank that interrupted the proceedings.

"Hold on thar! Reckon it's me that yer after; an' ther' ain't no call ter pull Belshazzar entirely over ther divide. Let up on him, an' let me hear you toct yer horn. Ef you've got anything thet looks like a squar' game, I'll chip to ther limit."

"Hands up, then, an' no foolin'. An' Fancy, you thar; what yer doin'?"

"Oh, Fancy is all right. This sort of thing always makes him weak, an' he's takin' a leetle sort ov a rest. Ef yer needs him right bad I'll hand him out, any way yer wants him. Take a squint, an' you kin see how it is yerself."

Belshazzar went down to the floor with a thump, as the man let go of the rope, and peered in through the window.

Since the glimpse he had lately taken there had been quite a change in the state of affairs. Fancy looked as though he might be fixed in a vise; the sport was pretty well concealed behind him; and over his shoulder projected the barrel of a revolver, that covered the man at the window.

He dodged down at the sight, with a grunt of surprise.

"Flag of truce, pard! We don't want to do yer any damage, an' yer may ez well go out alive an' kickin', head up an' tail over ther dasher, ez ter be carried out in three halves an' five quarters. What does yer say?"

"Strikes me I got ther age, an' may ez well hold it tell I kin hear from ther rest. Yer can't hev me onless I say so. What yer goin' ter do about it?"

"It lays this way, sport. We stand a good chance to get you out if we try, and it's dead open and shut that if we don't, Blue Blazes will lynch you in the mornin'. Don't you think you had better come down?"

"And it ain't a case ov shoot on sight ez soon ez I lose ther drop?"

"Nary shot in ourn—not tell we know we can't do better."

"Then, blame me ef I ain't your mutton!"

Of course Frank had no idea of disarming himself, but he gave the unfortunate Fancy a toss that sent him clear across the room, and then sprung to the side of Belshazzar. He was very much afraid that the bailiff was dead.

Life still lingered in the body, motionless though it lay, and the chances were that he would be around all right in a few moments, even if left to himself.

Relieved of this fear, Four Horse Frank was as cool and unconcerned as though his own danger was over.

"I'm not beat yet; but ther bulge seems to be torrads you, and I'll foller, jest ez long ez it don't seem ter make things wuss. When it does, you'll hear a holy cle cyclone a-brewin', an' it'll be time fer you ter raise an umbrella. Four Horse Frank are a bull team an' a dog under the wagon, when he bergins ter shout."

"Stay to that and we'll treat you white," laughed the man, with an entire change of tone; and without the least hesitation he swung himself through the window.

He made no more aggressive movement than to open the door, through which entered several other men, all masked like himself.

There was no more delay now. Two men raised the bailiff from where he was lying, and carried him some little distance from the house, to the spot where he was afterward found. By the time that they had returned, the work there was finished. The flames were already dancing merrily within, Frank was looking grimly on, his hands still in his side-pockets, and his eyes on the supposed leader, while Fancy was receiving some private instructions that did not appear to altogether agree with him.

Without a word further the leader stepped off, Frank, Fancy and the rest following him.

They walked rapidly, leaving the town behind them, and directing their course toward the mountains.

CHAPTER XIX.

CAPTAIN HOWL'S BIT OF TRUE HISTORY.

MISS LYTTON was not at all provoked by the cavalier manner in which Sonny Sharp had deserted her. It simply increased her respect for him that he had lost no time in trying to change her mind after once she had expressed her determination.

She had no certainty that he had effected his escape, even yet; but she rather thought that he had, and that he would reappear, after giving her time enough to complete her interview with Captain Howl. What she dreaded most was that the outlaws would change their headquarters for fear that the escaped prisoner might lead a force against them. Had she known the ins and outs of the place better she would not have troubled herself on that account.

Blue Blazes was the nearest place from which an attacking force could come, and the only one from which it could come within forty-eight hours. There was no danger of any army that they would fear being allowed to leave the camp without due notice being given to the road-agents; and if such an army even appeared unexpectedly at the outposts, escape by the "back door" was possible, if the force was too large to fight.

It was true that the captain had refused to accept the identity she had made out for him; but his reasons were not convincing at all. Marion was more than ever certain that she had found the missing Walter Midford. Whether she could make him disgorge, or, if not, whether she could carry out the vengeance she had threatened, were questions that she did not care to ask herself for the present; and she would not have thanked an outsider for expressing an opinion on the subject. If she had hopelessly involved herself it was nobody's business save her own. She was curious to know who the detective was who was to confront her that night, and what he was to prove against her, after all.

Highly strung as were her nerves, Miss Lytton finally went to sleep. When she was awakened, after some hours of slumber, she had almost forgotten the time and her surroundings.

Captain Howl was again in the alcove. With him had come three or four of his men—and a nondescript.

To look at this stranger, one could hardly tell if he was a prisoner like himself, or whether he had captured the whole outfit and was about to decide what was to be done with it. After observing him a little more intently, Marion, thanks to a good-natured wink, recognized him as the gasconade of the stage-coach, Four Horse Frank.

"At some little trouble and risk, we have brought Mr. Garland to see you, and assist at our interview. He slipped up on us last night, and it was not so easy to cage him again, but luck was in our favor. Perhaps, if we had told him the exact facts in the first place, it might have saved some labor, for he was mighty willing to come along after we got him to-night. Now, then, we'll imagine that we are all friends together, and get down to business. Mr. Garland can make his report, if he has any, and then I will talk to you both."

Marion looked coldly from one to the other.

"You are certainly very much mistaken if you think I am expecting any report from this man, to whom I am not sure I ever addressed a word in my life. I saw him on the stage, I believe; and then thought that he resembled a man who came to me pretending to have means of procuring me information. I would have sought an interview with him, hoping that he might really know something of the man I was searching for, though I had distrusted him at the first meeting. Before I could reach him I was your prisoner. He may be Dan Garland, and he may be Captain Howl's brother—you look enough alike to be of one blood—but beyond what I have said, I know nothing about him."

"Ef you'll allow me," said Frank, interrupting the captain.

"Jest one question. About what time did this yere leetle lamb git inter ther wolves' fold last night?"

Marion threw in an answer before Howl could interfere. She saw that the sport had some reason for asking the question.

"An early hour—before I had retired. I had gone out in quest of you, and was seized in the passage, and gagged before I had an opportunity to cry out."

"That settles her, then. I tho't thar war a rat in ther meal-tub. I kin sw'ar I never spoke to ther leddy afore in my life."

"And that settles it that you are a monumental liar, and haven't considered where you are going to when you die. Dan Garland is not the name that belongs to you, and that's a fact; but all the same, it is the one you travel under. How in the name of heaven you ever got together, is more than I know; but it goes without saying that you are both working the same lead, and that either of you would be a mighty good maverick to corral. If you're not brother and sister, you are as near to it as the law allows. If I keep on, I'll have the whole brood to crush together."

"I know not what you mean; and yet, after that, can you deny that you are Walter Midford?"

Marion thrust the question at him suddenly, as though she thought she had caught him off his guard, and was going to make the most of it.

The outlaw smiled darkly.

"If I was in your case, and knew what you seem to know about Walter Midford, I think I wouldn't be so anxious to make that clear until I got out of reaching distance—say a couple thousand miles away. If you had any proof, and I was the man you say, do you think that either of you could walk away alive, and stand forever between me and the wealth that will soon be lying around loose? Think it over again, and see if you are just as certain as you thought you were."

For the first time Marion paused to consider her answer, meantime looking curiously at the sport, who sat with his hands between his knees and his head bent down, as though in deep thought.

The attitude of the sport showed her nothing, and she was unable to recall the fleeting suspicion she knew had darted through her brain. She turned again to the outlaw.

"I have no doubt that you would kill me if you dared, and perhaps may try it before we part; but what especial object you can have had in bringing this man here to meet me is more than I can guess. To save time, I may say that I have thought it all over since you and I met yesterday. I do not care to share the proceeds of your robberies; and, unless I do, all thought of restitution of the wealth stolen from us is hopeless. This I do offer: Give back to me the papers that have made my mother and my brother not only portionless, but nameless, and so far as I am concerned, you can stay here and riot in your crimes. If you do not do this I will hunt you to the bitter end, as I swore."

"That's a little nearer to common sense than I've heard you yet. Unfortunately, under the new developments, while the return of the papers as suggested might rehabilitate the lady who claims to be your mother, financially speaking it would not do her a particle of good. If yonder man is indeed a stranger to you, you have unearthed a good deal more than you expected when you set out on this trail. If he is as genuine as he seems, I think I see the explosion that will follow about the time he gets a glimpse of the precious documents. Of course, by this time, he has dropped to the main facts in the case, though you haven't been laying them off just as clearly as you might."

"What is it that you mean?" asked Marion, knowing by the manner of the man that he

could make some unexpected revelation if he chose.

"I mean that yonder is Dan Garland, sure enough; but he is also the long-lost Frank Midford; and under the will—made perhaps before your half-brother was born, but the will, all the same—he will take every cent—that can be found."

"It is false!" exclaimed Marion, hotly.

"Frank Midford—William F.—died long enough ago."

"So you think; but if the young man in the corner there is not very much alive then I am more mistaken than I usually get. Talk to him and see if he don't speak for himself."

"Four Horse Frank's good ernuf handle fur me," retorted the sport, doggedly.

"Why, confound you, do you know who Four Horse Frank really was?" exclaimed the captain.

"He war jest about my size; an' when yer get me yer hev ther bull ov him."

"Why, you bald-faced liar! Four Horse Frank was killed right here, in the Trump Card Mine, years ago, when you were nothing but a boy. And Frank was a man all over, and every inch of him."

"Mebbe you knowed him, then?" suggested Frank, as though yet unconvinced.

"Like a book!" responded Captain Howl, without hesitation.

"Then mebbe you'd be a good man ter hev 'round when that crazy Belshazzar's mussin' about in what don't concern him. Blamed ef I haven't a notion ter take yer along in."

"When you go," retorted the captain.

"I guess we'll all go when we get good an' ready," answered Frank, with more and more of his old, off-hand style. "I give fair warnin' when I started that I wouldn't stay with yer longer than things looked lovely. I aip't talkin' ag'in. All both hands are loose, an' when it looks ez though you war goin' ter begin ter crowd, I'll be jumpin' in with both feet. That was my tune I war a-blowin'; now you kin go along an' talk to ther young leddy. I'll take a rest."

"Rest all you want to; perhaps your physicians will prescribe more of it than is pleasant before this little family tea-party is over. Before you close your eyes it might be as well for you to observe that the angels are watching over your slumbers. Whether they are the destroying angels or not depends on circumstances."

He smiled sarcastically, and pointed at three men on the opposite side of the alcove. They were sitting on the floor, and their carbines, ready cocked, bore on Four Horse Frank with a deadly aim.

Then the captain turned again to Marion.

"Behind all this there is a bit of family history you may never have heard, and I may as well tell it to you so that when you meet that fugitive uncle of yours you will understand the situation. Never mind how Captain Howl got on to it, the facts are solid, just as I shall relate them."

"Your mother, my dear, was a fool; and one of the sort that can do more damage than a dozen wise women. She ruined Walter's life, and your father's, and executed as condign justice on your step-father—the late Frank Midford, senior—as his dearest friend could wish for. You see, the two Midfords seem to have been accepted lovers, or something of the kind, before Mr. Lytton appeared on the stage; and as she couldn't marry both of the brothers she took him, off-hand."

"Frank was a widower and took things philosophically, especially as he had a little family already on the way. Walter left suddenly, and did not come back and until Mr. Lytton passed in his checks. Then he came to comfort the widow—who did not seem to need much comforting, anyway."

"In the language of the profane, she took to him like a sick kitten to a hot brick—and then married his brother in much the same style and haste that she had taken Lytton."

"Walter looked around for a chance to get even, did not see any, and disappeared again. He kept an eye on the couple, all the same. The treachery of his own brother, and of the only woman he had ever loved, was a harder pill than he could swallow without a wriggle, and he was waiting for his chance. Well, it turned out that the was not altogether an angel, after all. The boys couldn't stand their step-mother and run away. One of them was killed, and the other vanished so completely that he was supposed to have joined his brother, over on the shining shore. I thought so until to-night. Last of all, the old man went also."

"He dropped everything and departed, nor was he heard from again till his brother came floating back, armed with a will, and full proofs of his death. It seemed that the death of Frank the younger was by no means a fixed fact in the mind of the deceased senior, and so the real estate, and everything else that the law allowed, was left to him, if he turned up. Otherwise everything went to his lawful heirs. The wicked uncle, administrator, corraled all the personal property, and the proceeds of some little real estate that he was able to sell, and once more

vanished. Your mother insisted that he got her marriage-certificate at the time that he got the will, but that remains to be proved. There was a copy of the will on record, but that did not help her much without the certificate, and she always claimed that it was a forgery anyhow. Of one thing she was very certain. Frank never knew that he had a brand new son to lavish his affections on. If there was one he came on the stage of action after the father had departed. And now, here's the sole legatee on the carpet, to see that justice is done to the woman that drove him and his father from their home, and caused the death of his brother. What in thunder do you want of me?"

And having reeled off his story in a way that said he thoroughly believed it, Captain Howl paused for a reply.

CHAPTER XX.

AN HONEST MAN CAN BE AS OBSTINATE AS ANYBODY ELSE.

THE amount of personal property left Belshazzar Brick after the conflagration would have made a very slender load for a small-sized wheelbarrow. The Fire Department of Blue Blazes was always an impromptu affair, gotten up for the occasion, and never saved anything. Even his revolvers were lost, having dropped out of his hands when the rope tightened around his neck. He moved himself over into Dandy Webb's cabin, however, borrowed a brace of shooting-irons, and was ready for business the next morning.

While the marshal and Dandy, at rather a late hour, were eating their breakfast, there was a hesitating knock at the door.

"Come in, if ye'r white!" shouted Dandy, after his usual brusque style, and then kept on eating.

The door did not open, but the rapping was repeated, in a more hesitating way than before.

With a growl of disgust Dandy arose and flung open the door—to find at the threshold Gerald Sinclair, the young man who had applied for the marshal's protection at the Spotted Dog, a couple of nights before.

"An' what kin you want?" was the question he snapped at the young man; and he spoke in a tone that was not a bit more cordial than he could make it.

Without any delay, Sinclair inquired for Mr. Brick.

"He's right in thar, downin' his grub. Ef I war you, I wouldn't interrupt him; but ef you'll keep yer mouth shet you kin stand round hyar tell he's done. Now, don't yer kin knock-in' hyar ag'in er thar'll be war."

Mr. Sinclair moved meekly away a short distance, and seated himself on a convenient log. He did not show any wrath at the unceremonious way in which he had been treated, and Dandy went back to his seat on a cracker-box with a laugh. He had no use for any such creatures, and he liked to wipe his boots with them. He said as much to the marshal; and appeared surprised that he thought differently. Brick got up and went out as soon as he understood the facts.

"So you ain't left town?" was his greeting, as he approached the young man, who looked up at him in a weary sort of way.

"No, Mr. Brick, I have not; but I begin to think that perhaps I had better go. I came here in quest of a man, sir-ah, and for other incidental reasons. So far, I have been progressing backward. Only for a chance remark let fall by yourself I might have abandoned hope altogether. I had been warned, sir-ah, not to have any dealings with you; and I did not speak when and as I might have done. Since then I have been unable to find you. You said the other night that you had known my father. Did you also ever know his brother?"

"I reckon you hold over me, pard. I didn't know he hed a brother, an' jest now I ain't sure I ever knowed either ov 'em. I can't be botherin' 'bout sich things now, while my man are on foot, an' a-runnin'. Go home, sonny, an' I'll talk to yer some other time."

"Mr. Brick, you are making a terrible mistake about that man. He cannot be the individual that you think he is; and if he were it would make no difference. That reward can never enrich you, since it was withdrawn long ago. Not only did the man not kill Jean Janvrin, but that gentleman is still living; and was in no good humor over the officiousness of his friends. Perhaps there was a mystery about his disappearance for a time that he would not have cared to have cleared up, or even hinted at. Sure it is that he never explained it. And Frank Sinclair was the man that was supposed to have killed him."

"Don't try ter stuff me with any ov yer ghost stories, young man, or I'll hev ter run yer in."

"I as-sure you, sir-ah, that I am speaking by card. The man you accuse is helping me in my search, and after we find him I think I can convince you of his innocence. I come to you to help me in the quest for him. And I come also to call your attention to another disappearance that is even yet more alarming. As Bailiff of Blue Blazes you should know what is taking place in your town. A young lady in whom,

also, I have an interest, has vanished. If you are the man that they say you are you will hardly allow such a thing to happen without at least some investigation."

"Now ye'r talkin' whar I kin foller. I did hear somethin' ov a gal thet come on ther stage hev'n bin skeered out; but ef you kin show thet it's a case whar I ort ter freeze on, you kin expect ter find Belshazzar Brick right thar. Give us ther p'int, will yer?"

Then the young man in a straightforward way told him about Marion Lytton having come to Blue Blazes in quest of a man who might well be willing to do something desperate to defeat the objects of her expedition.

"Maybe you an' she are in cohoots, a-huntin' fur the same man?" remarked Belshazzar, dryly, and looking the fellow over.

"No, we are after totally different persons. I heard of her mission from a detective who accompanied her, and to whom I applied in hopes that he could assist me. He told me, sir-ab, that as he was already engaged to work for a lady he could not give me his time; and since it was no secret, he confided to me the nature of her mission, and it was mutually agreed that we would do anything for each other that came incidentally in our way. You should be able to help us both, sir-ab. As an old inhabitant, you are said, sir-ab, to know the record of every man in this camp. What easier, then, than for you to point out our man if he is here?"

"That's all mighty centerstin', leetle man, but unless that man hez committed a crime ez I kin run him in fur I don't see whar I ketch on. Ez ther sworn Bailiff ov Blue Blazes I can't mix in any private fun, when thar's a man runnin' loose whar orter hev a noose 'round his neck. Show me ther wuss man an' I'll pull off ov this trail, an' take ther other."

"Provided it has twenty thousand dollars in it," said Gerald, somewhat bitterly. "It is not enough that I tell you of a woman, exposed to all the nameless dangers that can befall her among the outlaws of the hills. If such an one does not come within the protecting pale of the law in Blue Blazes the sooner it has new laws, and a new marshal to enforce them the better. Why, sir-ab, these men make a mock of you and your power. Twice they have stolen from your hands a prisoner whom you believe to be one of the most desperate of men, and they have him even now. I believe they would have killed you this last time if they had not known that an honest fool in authority in this camp was worth more to them than a dozen wise rascals. It you are that sort of a man go your way, sir-ab, and I will act for myself. When I am through with my search I may find time to have a settlement with you."

Mr. Sinclair took off his eye-glasses to glare at the marshal, and shook his cane at him in one time and about forty motions. He looked as though he would like to go for the marshal, then and there.

Dandy Webb, who was taking observations from the cabin door, now and then, as he put away the breakfast dishes, grew so wrothy at the insolence of the young man that he shouted:

"Smack him one for luck, anyhow; an' I'll see the boys pick out a sharp rail fur him ter ride when he leaves town ter-night."

Instead of growing angry, Belshazzar became more interested, though a puzzled look began to creep into his eyes, as he regarded the young man.

"Hold on, youngster, an' don't try ter teach yer ole gran'paw how ter chase ther foxes. Ef ther hounds turned off fur every fresh track how soon would they ketch a wolf? You an' me kin foller ther trail fur Four Hoss Frank, an' ef it runs inter one thet'll lead us to ther gal—so much ther better all 'round. But I did hear she hed jest got skeered out an' left. Ez I sed, gimme a p'int ter work on an' I'll be skin-nin' out in no time, ter see whar it leads to."

"There is a man in this town that can give you such a point if he is certain, sir-ab, that you will do as you say; and keep the facts from the public until it is time for them to know the truth. I suspect that, when the truth is known, some of your estimable citizens will either want to make tracks, or will find themselves in a bad box. It is impossible that these disappearances could have been worked as they have been unless they were aided in by some one in the town."

"I ain't takin' much stock in sich myst'ries," replied Belshazzar, speaking with much deliberation, and as though carefully weighing his words; "but you can't show me a thing in my line thet I won't look at—when I hev ther time. Mebbe thar's some big-bugs thet ain't prezactly squar'; an' ef so I'm willin' ter know it?"

His last words seemed more like a question than a simple statement of facts.

"That is just what we want to know. If we can depend on you there is some hope in going ahead and seeing what we can do. And we will succeed, no matter who is against us, if we have to bring the whole United States army here. It would take longer time; but we would run the rascals down—and the men who are willing to tacitly aid them in their game."

"That's right. Speak up, leetle man! Talk don't do no hurt, an' ef it warn't fur ther

losin' ov vallyble time I'd jest admire ter lis'sen to yer all mornin'. I bin out a'ready, lookin' fur a trail, an' I'm a-startin' ag'in, forth-with. When I git time you call 'round ag'in an' we'll git it all straight."

Belshazzar turned away, and from what he had said it was not certain that he did not look upon the young man as decidedly crazier than himself.

And yet, there was a strange look in his eyes that made Gerald Sinclair think that perhaps he had absorbed an idea or two, even if he did not listen to him to the end.

CHAPTER XXI.

VISITORS AT THE CRACK CLAIM.

"It's no use, Mr. Sharp," said Gerald Sinclair, speaking to the little detective, perhaps half an hour after he had closed his conversation with Belshazzar.

"He's not open to reason. Four Horse Frank is on the brain, and it will not come off until that gentleman is caged for good. I tried to suggest that the place to begin to look for the missing might be in Blue Blazes, but he refused to listen until he gets back from the trail he is just starting on."

"All right, then. Let me work this end, and he can have the other; though I'd sooner have it the other way. I'll swear to it that Wildmont has not been out of town since I hung on to him in the early part of the evening; and as long as we can keep him here, I don't reckon your man or my woman can be in much danger."

"But are you sure, sir-ab, that this Wildmont is the man we are looking for? He has a great many friends in this city, and unless we can take him, so to speak, red-handed, it may not be safe to attack him."

"You couldn't have laid it down plainer if you read it from a book. You can bet a dollar that he's one of the men we want bad—but you'll have to get Frank of the Four Horses to tell you which one. I can gamble on his being Captain Howl, if that's any satisfaction. My mark is on him, right where I left it—and I'd like to scoop him in before it has time to wear off. It may be that he and the bailiff are in cahoots, and what you said will give him a hint on the matter; but it was the best we could do. I didn't want to go nosing around till I saw if he would take hold. I guess I can risk a little with the gallant colonel, though. I think I will visit him, and see how he looks by daylight, anyhow."

"And what am I to do meantime?"

"Guess you had better go along; and let me do the talkin. You're Gerald Sinclair, looking for your uncle, Frank Sinclair, or proof of his death. Think you have got onto proof that he was killed in the Crack Claim tunnel, years ago. As this Wildmont seems to be working the very same lead, from a different stoep, you may want to know if he ever came across his bones."

"That will do—and may develop more than we think for. But I have been thinking whether it would not be as well to give this thick-headed marshal a hint of where he may find his game—the spot, I mean, sir-ab."

"Not a bit of it. We don't want that nest stirred up till we are sure that the boss hornet is in it. If we don't catch Wildmont on the spot, he will get away with the luggage of the whole procession. If I wasn't sure that Belshazzar would fool away his time hunting on the wrong side of the camp, in case he does go for the agents, I would say that he had a bigger hint already than suits our hand."

"Let it be so, then, sir-ab. My experience in such things is slender. We will interview Wildmont."

The colonel at that moment was seated in a little, rough cabin, known as the office, and which stood at the mouth of the Crack Claim Tunnel. Moreover, he was already giving audience to an interviewer.

At a post in front of the cabin stood a wiry little mustang, that any one in the camp could have sworn to at first sight; and inside, half sitting on, half lounging against the colonel's desk, was Miss Aileen Arnaugh. She was dashing and degage as usual; but his face wore unwonted seriousness.

"And so, my dear colonel, you think it is time to boll?"

"To my great sorrow, I must say that I think it is. It is the wicked that there is no rest for."

"And as we get none, we must be awfully bad? Come, now. That is rather rough on the gentle damsel that shares your woes. I don't feel myself more wicked than the worst; and I don't want to leave Blue Blazes. I am not sure that I will, either."

"It is a pity, fer things are moving in such a shape, that if we were left alone to work it out by honest industry, we could hardly help but make a fortune."

"Bless my soul! I thought that the lead had dropped, and the Crack Claim as good as petered out. It is certainly so reported."

"The lead has dropped, sure enough; but if we don't reach it on this level, I know where to find it again."

"In the name of vengeance, why don't you do it, then? It's a heap pleasanter to be taking out

three thousand a day than to be paying out three hundred, and nothing at all coming in."

"I might strike something 'else!" responded the colonel, with a show of solemnity that made the young lady open her eyes.

"Hello! There must be a ghost down there; and the very ghostliest kind of a ghost, to scare Colonel Wildmont. Tell us the truth, old boy. It's not sentiment that keeps you back, is it?"

"Not sentiment, but bones!" retorted the colonel, with a forced laugh. "It may be just as well if we are to leave here, for the present. When I throw up my hand, it is not likely that any one else will try to jump the place for a year or so; and by that time, if I have luck, I may be able to get hold of it in such a shape that I can again work it in safety. There's millions in it yet."

"And millions in the snug little establishment I am running, down-town. I swear to you that I never knew how money was made before I took possession of it, and you can bet I hate to leave it. I guess Hank has been squirming like a fine fellow ever since I opened up, and won't weep when I close up the blinds."

"You take it easier than I feared. If you had not given yourself away to this Four Horse Frank—as he chooses to call himself—you might stay here a few weeks, till I had laid a blind trail, and then join me with a pocket all the heavier."

"If that man was all there was to take me away I would run the risks. I tell you, he saved my life once, and I had to get even. I pumped him thoroughly, and you were all wrong about him. If you had let him alone he wouldn't have bothered with the road-agents. And I'm open to take even money that he never gives me away, even if he goes for your gang now. What under the sun did you want to meddle with him for, anyhow?"

"Don't you believe it! He is a dangerous man, and coming in such company, he was bound to run against us. The only pity is that we did not take the advice of Fancy, and slaughter him off-hand."

"And include Belshazzar Brick in the operation. Do your prettiest, though, for the marshal will never let up till he finds his man again. Where is the lively sport now?"

"Ask no questions and you will be burdened with no troublesome secrets. I must see you again to-night when I have my plans perfected. Hush! There comes a visitor."

The quick ears of the colonel had caught the sound of an unfamiliar footstep outside, and it went to show that he was not altogether himself, when such a little thing as that startled him. He looked around as though he had some idea of concealing his feminine friend, and probably he would have made the effort if it had been possible. Miss Arnaugh divined his intention, and laughed merrily.

"Don't be a goose, Wildmont. It's nobody's business if I am here, and unless you try to make a mystery out of it nobody will worry their brains over the fact. You just keep your wits about you for your visitors. You may need them."

There was no time for more before the expected rap came at the door, and Master Maurice Montmorenci made his appearance at the threshold, with Gerald Sinclair at his shoulder.

"Morning, colonel," was the cheerful salutation of the youth, as he advanced into the room, holding out his hand. "Picked up this gentleman, who said he wanted to interview you, and didn't exactly know how. I told him that if he thought a man might know something he wanted to know, the only way for him to know was to ask him. Touch him lightly, fer he's not up to the ways of the woolly West, and the boys have got him so scared that he don't know whether his soul is his own or not."

"Glad to be of any possible benefit to the gentleman, if he don't take up too much of my time. Of course, we have our little business secrets; but in a general way I don't suppose he will be apt to ask for anything that I would not be willing to tell. And by this time he ought to have found out that the bark of the Blue Blazes sports is a great deal worse than their bite. How can I be of any service to you?"

He looked up inquiringly at the young man, who stepped forward hesitatingly.

"My name, sir-ab, is Gerald Sinclair. I am in search of my uncle, one Frank Sinclair, who came West a number of years ago, and was supposed to have died, sir-ab. Unfortunately for me, sir-ab, there was no proof of the fact; and until it can be obtained, some very worthy people, myself among the number, are kept from the enjoyment of a fortune that, were he still living, would belong to him. Indications go to show that he came in this direction during the early days of this settlement; and as there is no trace of him at any subsequent period, the probabilities are strong that he died here. It is to obtain your assistance to procure proof of this that I approach you, sir-ab."

The colonel thought that he had got his nerves pretty well under control again, but he gave a start in spite of himself. It was only a little one, but it did not escape the eyes of the youth—whom the reader now knows as Sonny Sharp—nor those of Aileen Arnaugh. The colonel

was thinking more of the young man before him, and as Gerald was nervously fumbling with his eyeglasses while speaking, it did not seem likely that he had observed it.

"Well, really, young man, considering that I am what is considered a new-comer here, and have paid but little attention to what was going on outside of my own particular affairs, I am not exactly the one to come to. I do not remember the name, and I certainly never met your uncle—to my knowledge. Why did you suppose that I could give you any aid?"

"Well, ah," responded Gerald, more nervous than ever in his manner. "The fact is that he seems once to have had an interest in a mine here; and they tell me that you have—ah, relocated it, I believe they call it—under, ah, the same name; and are working it, though not on the same drift. I thought perhaps you might, ah, have found, well, sir—ah, his—bones."

To say the least, the coincidence was remarkable. Only a few moments before the colonel had been saying something about finding some bones, and here was a young fellow almost taking the words out of his mouth. Aileen looked keenly at the two.

The little detective was regarding her with the Montmorenci smile, while Sinclair evinced nothing but feverish good faith.

"What in Heaven's name do you think I could know about his bones?" exclaimed the colonel, starting up and turning fiercely toward Sharp.

"Is this some practical joke of yours, young man?"

"Take it easy, colonel," was the smiling answer. "If it's a business secret that we are asking, of course we don't press for an answer; though a yes or no is not going to hurt any one, and might do our friend, Gerald, here, a good deal of good. I have been explaining to him that as the claim had been certainly abandoned, your right to its possession could not be disputed, if it was packed full to the nozzle with the corpses of former owners."

"Get out of here, both of you, before I pitch you out!" yelled Wildmont, in unreasoning wrath. "I know nothing of your Frank Sinclair, and if I ever find you two on the place again, I'll kill you both."

"Gently, colonel. It's not always the best plan to speak when your mad is 'way up. Take your time to it and spell a-b-l-e three times over and mighty slow. Then you can send us a postal card to say what you think about it. Good-morning, sir. After such ungentlemanly proceedings we could not think of remaining another moment, and if this young lady is wise she will look after her safety and go along too."

"Fudge!" retorted Aileen. "If you came in here to see how Wildmont looks when he loses his temper and his wits together, you have got all you wanted. Now, I would go before he begins to shoot. That would be too dizzy nonsense for any use. Get out you little fool, or I'll use my riding-whip where I think it belongs."

"Thanks for the warning, Miss Aileen. We will go, for you; but a young man of my inches, that has mowed down the road-agents as though they were jimson weeds, and cleaned up your brag players at draw, is not going to be scared very badly by such a bald-headed old bear as that. I can be shooting while he is getting his irons ready. Good-day, anyhow."

As if very indignant, Sonny strutted toward the door; but his hands were in his side pockets, and it was a very near thing that he did not pull the triggers, as a brace of revolvers suddenly appeared in the colonel's hands, and he sprung toward them.

It was the cry of angry surprise uttered by Wildmont that caused Sharp to refrain, and he was glad of it, when he saw the colonel dash headlong through the door.

CHAPTER XXII.

MARION VANISHES.

To go back to Marion: The outlaw chief evidently threw in his question more for the sake of curiosity than for any profit he might derive from it. He was so thoroughly disguised that it was impossible to see any expression on his face; yet from the actions of the man it was not hard to guess how he looked as he shot the query at Marion.

That young lady listened to his story all through, her manner showing an undisguised interest, since, so far as she knew, he told a great deal of truth.

When it was all done, however, she answered as coldly as ever:

"You have at least shown me that you are Walter Midford, since no one else could have told the story as you have done, allowing that everything you have said has been the truth. I have nothing else to add. This man may, or may not, be my step-father's oldest son; but in either case I do not think that he will aid you to that revenge which you seem so desperately anxious to obtain. The law and the courts can settle his claims. I am dealing with you only. I shall, however, speak no more after this with you on the subject. I have already said enough and I meant every word that I said. Restore the purloined papers, or I give you no rest until one or the other of us is dead."

"That is enough," gritted the outlaw. "It

was hardly worth while to listen to your ravings, but then I was curious to develop things just as they are. Now, you keep your ears open an' don't miss a note of the little dirge that I am going to warble. When you first turned up on this trail it only looked as if you might find out a few inconvenient facts if you rooted around long enough; and all that I wanted was to scare you off, and pay the expenses of the operation. Since this step-brother of yours has turned up, there has been a chance developed Captain Howl would be a fool to throw over his shoulder. It makes things somewhat more difficult to run, perhaps, but not more dangerous. If this very fresh young man will behave only reasonably well he will be turned loose to finish his little fling at Blue Blazes. As for you, there is no hope for you. You will have to permanently disappear until you turn up as somebody's bride—or something else. It is very likely that you will never be heard of again."

"An' a right good sorter game it would be," muttered Four Horse Frank, just loud enough to be heard by the rest. "Ef I war only ther man yer says I be, an' things be sich, it wouldn't be slow. Hev me down to Blue Blazes, whar I kin be killed off an' 'denterfied by some ov yer heelers, an' then go fur ther real estate ez ther residuary legatee. Ov course it would be onpleasant fur this young lady ter turn up; ter explain how ther racket hed bin worked; so ther only thing to do are ter give her a boost over ther divide. That's his game; now, this hyer are mine. Hands up, er drop cold! I've got the dead medicine on you, anyhow."

The sport had seen that there was a chance, and had taken it without a moment's hesitation.

The three guards had become somewhat wearied with this low-toned conversation, and had never for a moment expected any resistance in the face of such odds, unless violence was actually attempted. Their eyes wandered, and the muzzles of their carbines ceased to point at the prisoner. When their startled attention was recalled, Frank, with a bound, had placed himself beyond the outlaw to whose threats he had just been listening, and had the drop on him with one derringer, while with another he menaced them.

"Don't yer move, Howl," he continued, "or I'll drop you sure!"

The outlaw showed just then that he was a man of nerve. He neither winced nor grew excited.

"I guess there's no great harm done until some one pulls trigger. After that it's not hard to guess that you are bound to go up the flume. You can't get away with all four of us; and if I drop out of the way the fellows over there are bound to make a riddle out of you. Come down to Limerick, young man! Let us hear what you expect."

"Ef you don't know my style by this time, so much ther worse fur you. When I expect er thing I mean ter hev it, right bad. You an' me kin come ter terms of thar's somethin' like an even chance. Jest tell these gents they ain't wanted hyer, an' ter draw out. Then you an' me kin worry over ther terms ov ther barg'in!"

"If you think of going out of here alive, after making any sort of a bargain with me, you had better leave them where you can see them. When I haven't my eye on them they act on their own hook, and the orders about potting strangers that wander into Howl's Retreat are very strict."

"Thar's a heap in that. Glad you mentioned it. Now, put your hands up a leetle higher, an' then tell them to drop their guns, gently like, an' move along to ther far corner."

It looked as though Four Horse Frank was master of the situation. Howl's hands went up a trifle more, and the guards softly laid their weapons down, at a sharp order from the outlaw captain.

And then, from somewhere above, a sharp crack was heard, the derringer flew out of Frank's hand, while he himself staggered back, his other hand flung away upward, in an instinctive but vain effort to retain his balance.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the captain, a revolver appearing in his hand as if by magic.

"Two can play at the game of hands up, and if I don't come out ahead it's mighty funny, since that's my trade. I've been caught once in here, and that's enough. Nothing like having a good man outside."

He had not counted on the desperate energy that a man like Four Horse Frank could throw into his purpose, and perhaps had believed the sport to be more badly hurt than he was.

As he moved a step nearer the other gave a gigantic spring, and with his left hand seized Captain Howl by the throat.

The sport had transferred the derringer that he had retained from the left hand to the right, as though he was afraid to trust the latter with the work; but it seemed none the worse for the shock, and it came up just as steady as ever, just in time to stop the rush of the three guards, who, ordered or not, were about to strike in to the rescue of the captain.

"Ob, no, boys! Unless you are yearnin' ter see a vacancy, an' a new ch'ice, I'd jest leave

things ez they be fur a bit, tell we see how this hyer thing are goin' ter work. I don't reckon that I can scoop this bull outfit, but I kin have a heap of fun tryin', ef some one don't knuckle down mighty soon. Now, jest hold on tell we talk this thing over a bit."

"Don't see how thar's much room fur talkin', boss," said one of the three. "Ef you don't take yer paw off you'll hev a piece ov cold meat thar. Ef orders hedn't bin strict not ter kill yer ef it could be helped, I don't jedge you would be livin' now. An' ef he's on ther way up ther flume I guess it's time ter scoop you in."

"You hold back, an' I'll let up. Then, ef we can't git ter terms, I'll give ther word, an' we'll all go ez we please."

The proposition seemed to be accepted. At least, the forward movement was checked, and the muscles of the men relaxed.

Then Four Horse Frank gave the man in his grip a disdainful little toss, and he sunk down, gasping for breath, and almost senseless, while the sport, now holding up the revolver he had in some unseen way wrenched from Howl's hand, moved back a little further, so that he could not be again covered by the man who had taken the shot at him from above.

Through the eyelet holes in his mask the chief's eyes glared fiercely, but for a moment or two he made no movement, as though he might be gathering himself for a spring. Then, his hand felt stealthily around for a weapon.

A gurgling curse bubbled from between his lips as he discovered that he had been disarmed, but his gaze never left the face of Four Horse Frank.

"I'll kill you for this," he hissed, "when the time comes. But now you have got to live in spite of yourself. When you go off the books it will be when the men that see you fall will be able to swear to it, and your sorrowing relatives can put up a tombstone to show what has become of you. If you weren't worth your weight in gold as a corpse that way, and worse than carrion as a corpse here, you would never stir from that spot alive. Shoot, if you want to! I could die to know how the boys would tear you limb from limb."

"You've only got ter say ther word, boss, an' we'll down him; but you're runnin' things, an' we don't chip till we git orders—ez long ez you're on ther carpet to give 'em. You drew a line thar yerself, an' ef we ain't tryin' ter git over it, that ain't because we ain't willin' ter try ther rifle."

"That's all right," hastily answered Howl, speaking to his three guards, who did not seem altogether easy over the way matters had been progressing. "I picked you out as men that I could rely on, and you have only done your duty. It will be all the better for you."

"Glad yer like it; but what's ter be done with this galoot? He can't stand thar, holdin' ther drop all night."

"He won't want to, either, if he has the sense I think he has, and will listen to reason. I was bound to get at the bottom of his mission here; and now that we have done that I don't see that we have any further present use for him. All that we ask is his promise to keep to himself the particulars of his adventure with us and out he goes. After that, I guess he thinks that he is able to take care of his own precious head. If he can't, that's none of our concern."

There was a wonderful change in the manner of Captain Howl; and it went to prove of what value he believed the sport to be.

The latter showed no signs of surprise or unbelief. When he spoke it was not as a man who wanted mercy, or had the least idea that he was in bodily danger.

"You hev bin foolin' 'round ther bizzness end ov a cyclone tell you 'most got inter trouble, an' now you want ter git out ther easiest way yer kin. That's all right. You kin git. I don't recommender ov ever bein' badly skeered in this life, er ov gittin' inter a box that it war much ov a job ter git out ov. Two, er twenty—it don't make no difference what ther crowd are, I jest lead ther biggest heard I got, an' always take ther trick. I'll leave it to you. I'd jest ez soon stay ez go; an' ef yer thinks I'm goin' ter walk ter Blazes you're wide off. I want a boss, an' I'd call for a buggy ef I thort you could find one in this half of ther Territory."

"And you swear that you will keep silent about us and our hiding-places if we furnish the horse, and that you will go back to Blue Blazes if we allow you to go free?"

"Consider it swore to, my gen'rous friend. Four Horse Frank never war bluffed out ov a camp yit, an' it's too late fur that game ter work now."

"Then, in the name of all the fiends, take him along! And—where is that girl?"

Frank had put away his weapons, and was taking things coolly. He motioned over his shoulder with his thumb, and laughed as he spoke.

"Skipped out some time ago. About ther time you an' me began ter hev a pers'nal diffikilty she seemed ter think she warn't wanted longer, an' skipped accordin'. Ef she's ez smart ez I think she be, an' ain't run ag'in' any snags, she must be about half-way ter Blue Blazes by this time. Ef you've no objections I guess it's 'bout time fur me ter j'ine her."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A LION IN THE WAY.

THE cool sport was telling nothing but the cold truth. Marion had slipped away very early in the disturbance; and Four Horse Frank had been extending the difficulty as long as possible in order to cover her retreat.

So far as she could see, there was nothing more to gain, and everything to lose, by a longer stay among the outlaws. There was no doubt but that Sonny Sharp would either try to communicate with her, or take some means to effect her rescue the following day; yet the next day might be too late. The threats of Captain Howl were vague; but they all looked toward her death. If that extreme measure was once decided on, its execution would not be long delayed. An hour or two might close alike, her hopes of vengeance, and her life; unless, meantime, she made her escape.

She was already edging toward the rift in the rock, when Four Horse Frank made his first offensive movement.

When that brought all eyes upon him it was easy enough for her to slip out, unperceived by any one save Frank; and he was watching for the movement. After that, he kept attention strictly centered on himself, and managed to prolong the interview after a successful though dangerous fashion; all the time holding his ears open to catch the slightest sounds without, that might indicate her flight was being interfered with.

None came; and it was fair to believe that the guard had been shifted from the outer to the inner end of the passage through the rocks, and that Marion had at last gained the valley in which the men of Captain Howl were encamped without discovery; and perhaps had made some progress toward the outer, or lower end.

Whether she could make good her exit from the valley, or gorge, pass the outlying sentinels, and get safely on the road to Blue Blazes, was at first very doubtful to the sport; but, as he cheerfully concluded, it would do no hurt to try. Her case could hardly be made any worse.

Frank was one of those people who believe there are only two chances on anything. You can or you can't; and if you have the least bit of luck at all you are bound to win. As a woman, if caught she would be apt to receive more gentle treatment than a man could look for, especially if recognized as the prisoner to capture whom such extra exertions had been made.

Anyhow, Four Horse Frank thought it better for her to make the trail alone than for him to fight a way out for her. If she failed he had that in reserve.

Considering the opportunities he thought a great deal more concerning her than she did concerning him.

When she first glided from the recess in the rocks, though her eyes were eagerly exploring what was ahead, her sense of hearing was all turned backward. Every instant she expected to hear a crashing fire from the carbines of the guards, and then the fierce cries of the outlaws, as they came rushing after. Though she knew something about the West, and what some of its prominent citizens could do when they were at their best, she did not believe that the sport could come off successful from a contest with four such men as confronted him, even if he held a temporary advantage.

She heard the single shot, fired by the man who was posted above, and thought that the crisis had come. It was certainly not one of Four Horse Frank's derringers that had spoken. When no rush came, and again in the alcove, the murmur of voices went on, though now it came very faintly to her ears, she shrugged her shoulders, and hurried onward.

"He may be a braggart, and he may be my step-father's son; but he evidently knows how to hold his own along with the worst," was her thought.

"I may as well forget all about those behind me. They are passed. It is those in front that I have to fear."

And yet she was only about half right in that; for luck was in her favor.

With three men and Captain Howl to look after them, no one else was taking any thought about the prisoners. If Lorette had vanished the two genuine Italians were there yet; and in spite of the fracas of the afternoon they had been utilized to the full extent of their powers of amusement. They had kept the music going until so late an hour that the denizens of the valley were ready to sleep like rocks, and trust their safety to the sentinels with an abandon more complete than usual. There was not a soul awake to take note of Marion as she hurried along, following the only practicable route, which led her straight through the valley. She passed within a few yards of a dozen sleeping men.

If Four Horse Frank had been with her when she reached the outer limit of the valley he might have given her some valuable suggestions about passing the guards; but as she had seen nothing when she was brought thither, her progress had to be regulated by chance. She did not know where to look for sentinels; nor would she know how to flank them.

The way appeared to open naturally before her, and she just followed it on down, as being the only thing she could do. Sometimes she stumbled, at other times she was momentarily at fault. It seemed to her that she had been walking for hours, when she had only gone a scant mile beyond the camp.

Then the roadway pitched upward. It was just as well that the darkness around her had increased, otherwise her courage might have failed her while making the ascent, the dangers of which were only guessed at; and her guesses falling far short of the reality. Afterward, when she knew the truth she wondered how her feet could have been guided up the thread-like path that hung on the edge of a canyon wall, and a stumble from which would have meant certain death.

When she had been toiling upward for a long time she had a little insight into the nature of her peril.

Her foot gave a fling to a little stone and she heard it roll away.

Only for a revolution or two. Then the noise ceased so suddenly that she held her breath, why or for what she scarcely knew until she heard, far beneath her, a faint sound, marking the first place the stone had struck after its fall. Then she knew that if she had stumbled one way instead of the other she would have reached the end of all things, so far as she was concerned. If it had not been that she saw a little splotch of light straight ahead, that did not seem to be very far distant, she would have been afraid to proceed. As it was, a momentary terror overcame her, and she crouched, trembling, against the rocks.

Before she advanced again she considered the position well. The light patch of sky, visible in front of her, indicated that she was reaching the crown of the pass; if so what more likely than that she would find the road there occupied by an outlaw on guard. For some time she had been careless; but now, when she advanced again it was with the utmost caution. Her footfall made no noise, and in the blackness her approach could certainly not be seen.

By this time her eyes were well inured to the night; and she could see in a dimmer light than her eyes could ever before pierce.

At the very crest of the divide was a level bit of rock. On the one side of it was the black wall of the precipice, that went on upward hundreds of feet further. On the other was the black gulf of the canyon, going down, she knew not how far; but hundreds of feet, at least.

And on this bit of level rock lay a man, who seemed to be asleep, and yet might have taken that posture to listen better to some suspicious sounds. The general outline of the man was plain; but whether he lay on his back or face Marion could not make out.

There was one thing certain.

If she wanted to make her escape she had to pass right over this spot; and she doubted if she had much time to spare in planning her movements. Long ago she had expected to hear an outcry from her rear. It might be, however, that the outlaws were following in silence. The thought urged her onward, and cautiously she stole toward the recumbent figure.

From a nearer point of view there could be no question but what the figure belonged to a living man, who slept. Could she step over without awakening him, or must one or the other of them die?

For her step-uncle she would have felt no mercy, since she expected none from him; but with these men it was different. They were nothing but his tools; and she was as yet uncertain that they would consent to slay a woman.

As a woman, though a wronged one, assassination was repugnant to her feelings; and she thrilled all through with the feeling that it was a horrible thing to slay a man in his sleep, even while she braced herself for such a necessity. If he made an outcry, or fired a shot, attention would certainly be attracted to the spot; and in her ignorance of the dangerous path through the mountains, escape would be impossible.

Still, she would make an effort to pass this careless sentinel without the stain of slaughter on her soul. Within a few yards she dropped to her knees and crept up until she could have touched the fellow with her hand. His face was furthest from her, his head touching the wall of the pass, while his body almost completely blocked the road. His feet might have been perhaps half a yard from the verge of the precipice and his hand held a drawn revolver.

It might have been safest to attempt to step squarely over him, but Marion hesitated to do that. There was scant space to go around, but that was the course she preferred. Gathering her clothes tightly to her as she rose, and scarcely daring to draw a long breath, she rapidly crept by him, shivering as she went at her double danger.

She made no noise, and did not touch the man, but her presence was enough. Wide awake in an instant, he sprang to his feet, his revolver rising as he rose.

But starting as though from the ground, another man appeared, and flung himself at the outlaw, catching him by the throat as he came.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRANK SHOWS HIS HEELS.

BEFORE Marion could utter the cry, that came to her lips in spite of herself, the brief contest was over. The outlaw, who so carelessly had kept his watch, saw only Marion when he awoke, while the man who assailed him saw everything. Back went the half-dazed sentinel, his head striking the rock with terrific force.

To make sure the relaxing muscles were telling no lie, the head was brought down once more, with even a harder thud. Then, the uppermost man raised his left hand, with a gesture at once friendly and commanding.

"Wait!" he said, while he watched the quivering frame of the senseless outlaw, his other hand ready to choke off anything like a shout, should there be life enough left to give one.

Marion halted, her hand still in her bosom. Things are not always what they seem; and she was not yet sure that this easy victor was her friend, though there was something about his voice that sounded familiar. The undertone that he used was encouraging of itself. He no more wanted to attract the attention of the world of Howler's Retreat than she did.

When he had rapidly bound the hands and feet of the motionless man, and tied a handkerchief, bit-wise in his mouth, the conqueror rose and leaned toward her.

"Ah!" he whispered.

"I thought it was you; but I might have been mistaken. You are the young lady who came over in the stage, and who has been running from the Grand Occidental. The road-agents were a little more successful this time; but, ah, um! they didn't hold you, after all. Probably Four Horse Frank woke them up again. Where is he now?"

Then Mr. John More produced his inevitable snuff-box, and refreshed himself after his usual manner.

The "ah, um!" and the snuff-box rendered Marion certain. She identified him as her late fellow-passenger. What was he doing here so opportunely? As to his question, she answered it hastily.

"He is back yonder, in the hands of Captain Howl. They offered him his liberty if he would go—it was part of their game, after confronting him with me, to get him again to Blue Blazes. He is either the coolest man or the maddest that ever I saw. He refused to go—as I believe, for my sake—and began a fight with them all. How it ended, I know not; for when he had engaged their attention I stole away. I heard one shot, and then all was silent behind me, save now and then that a murmur of voices reached my ears. He will hold his own with them all if they do not crush him suddenly when they find me gone."

"Good for him! But he's none too modest about blowing his own horn, and maybe he'll cave when it comes to the pinch. I wonder why he wanted to see Howl's quarters so badly?"

"If all that the outlaw said was the truth, he had the same reasons as I. But I am rested now, and have some hopes of escape with you to lead the way. It is death for me to be taken, and there is no time for us to stand here and talk."

"Ah, um! How many more are there of Captain Howl's band?"

"Fifteen, at least—perhaps twenty."

"Then I suppose I have no business there. Whether we can get away from here, remains to be proved. We will try. Follow me. For a few moments there will be no danger from the front. After that you must keep very quiet."

"But how do you come to be here at all?" asked Marion, as she followed him without delay.

Her feminine curiosity would have prompted the query, without the tinge of suspicion that shaded her thoughts. Mr. More answered promptly:

"I heard something not intended for my ears, and went to Belshazzar Brick's cabin to see the fun. I got there a shade late. They were just marching this Four Horse sport away; and as he was going very cheerfully, I followed to see what they were going to do with him. I am not as young as I once was, but I have not altogether forgotten the lessons learned in Chiriqui and elsewhere. There is some life and strength left in the old man yet. I got this far on the road, but here I was stumped. I could have killed the man easy enough, but that would have been a punch into a hornets' nest. I've been waiting ever since to have him go to sleep. When I saw you creeping around him, I thought it was time to strike in. Ah, um!"

"And at a very good time you came. An other moment and it might have been too late."

"It looked like it," More answered, in his driest tones; "but you want to keep quiet now, for the next half-mile. If we get over that all right I can put you on the road to Blue Blazes—which is not so far off as people might think. It's not long until daylight; and I'd like to get beyond the range of pursuit by the time the sun rises."

More knew pretty exactly where this other sentinel was located because, with some little trouble and danger he had flanked him while he was engaged with the men who brought Four

Horse Frank to the Retreat. He intended to make an effort to follow the same course again.

Fortune favored him. Just when he had helped Marion up on a ledge of rocks, at that spot about breast-high from the grade they had been following, they heard voices. Some one had just approached the post, and having given whatever signal was necessary, had been allowed to advance. The result was that the sentinel was again conversing with a brother outlaw; and John More and his charge slipped by.

The way was not so bad now, and they made great progress. Marion, it is true, was woefully worn; but she struggled on. After such a miraculous escape she did not intend to be retaken. Such luck would hardly come to her twice.

If More had followed the route by which he had come it might have made traveling somewhat easier. Instead, when they had debouched from the pass he struck out a new course. The failure of pursuit so far had puzzled him, and he still looked to hear sign of it at any moment. When it came it would probably swirl along the regular road toward Blue Blazes, and on that trail was exactly where John More did not intend that he should be found.

When day dawned they could see the town in the distance.

"Do you think you could reach it alone?" asked More, pointing out the camp as he spoke.

"Perhaps," answered Marion, faintly.

"Going back to investigate. Ah, um. I must see what has become of our friend, the man of the four horses. It seems most likely, from what you say, that by this time they have killed him for his obstinacy; though if the outside camp is as soundly buried in sleep as you say, he may have a deadlock on the men in the alcove, or perhaps got away with them altogether. Such a man, if he is as skillful as he seems, can do a wonderful amount of damage when he lets himself loose. Ah, um!"

Mr. More spoke from an extended and general acquaintance with the free lances of sportdom, and he made no mistake in this case.

Four Horse Frank's cool proposition would have set Captain Howl wild with rage if he had not been in that condition already.

"Join her? Hades! You'll join her over the range. If she gets into that camp and tells her story we may as well jump the game. We can take the satisfaction of slaying you both; and then go look for something fresh. Stand aside, there. If we don't find her your life will be the forfeit."

"That war ther game in ther fu'st place, so I can't see ez I'll be any ther wuss off. An' fur you—jest take it easy. Unless that feller up above breaks his neck, he can't git hyer fur some time yit, an' I don't b'lieve he'll leave his post anyhow. I'm whar he can't hit me, an' you four I've got bunched about ez I want yer. Honest Injun, now, I'd hate ter kill my uncle, but ef you crowd me, I'll kill you ther fu'st spatter. Oh, I've got you all surrounded, an' you've caught ther biggest kind ov a Tartar."

"But, man alive, put up your weapons and listen to reason."

"They be up; but I kin pull, an' plug two, afore ary one ov you kin raise a barr'l. It's me that's runnin' this thing, an' I jest want ter study out what's ter be did with you afore I act accordin'. Somehow I don't jest begin ter be ez much afeard about thet gal bein' caught ez I war in ther fu'st place. I begins ter see another wrinkle. An' I wouldn't do it, ef you please. I'm only one man, hyer, among twenty blood-suckin' tigers. I fill my hand ag'in, an' I tell yer you may ez well stick ter ther offer yer made me, an' let me go. If yer tries this other plan, what you've bin keepin' back all along, blamed ef I don't spread myself all over this kenyon. You hear me?"

The pistols came back into his hands so quickly that though they were looking at him no one of the outlaws knew just how they were drawn.

"How? What is it that you mean?"

Captain Howl edged a little closer as he asked his question, and looked a great deal like a hungry dog eying a bone that was just outside of his reach.

"Why, blame you, all that talk hez been put on ter fool ther pair ov us. It war me you wanted ter kill; an' you ain't Walter Midford at all. He's back in Blue Blazes, waiting to gather in the shekels, an' ter tend ter Marion when she gits thar. Ye'r' right. Ef you were real smart I'd be in a heap ov danger. But when yer put yer camp ter sleep ter let her go through, mebbe yer didn't 'range ter makin' it. I'll run ther risks, anyhow, an' ef I can't skip I'll slaughter."

Then his finger tightened, and Captain Howl dropped.

At the same time his other hand was at work. From the moment that he caught the drop in the first place the guards thought they knew how it would be; and now they had not time to know they had not been mistaken. He fired four shots in three seconds; and then ran out of the alcove.

CHAPTER XXV.

BELSHAZZAR STANDS BETWEEN.

"Hrr 'em plumb center ther first shot! Who says ther ain't more luck than judgment in this

world? An' it's John More ez hez ther maiden in charge. Where ther thunder does he come in at?"

Marion and her guide were resting on the way when they heard footsteps close at hand; and before they had time to fairly look around, Four Horse Frank made his appearance, just in good shooting distance, these questions on his lips, and his hand on his revolvers. Probably, if he had been gunning for them, he could have dropped both before they were aware of his presence.

More, at least, was startled, and his movement for a weapon was only half-checked as the rollicking voice of the sport fell on his ear. The two men looked at each other with more or less suspicion.

More's presence was unexpected; and about Frank's escape there appeared to be something mysterious.

"I am glad to see that you escaped," interposed Marion, quickly.

"I owe you a debt I feel I never can properly pay; and to Mr. More owe but little smaller. Without him I would have been lost. He came to my rescue just at the crisis. Perhaps you stumbled over some of his handiwork."

"Didn't observe anyt'ing ov ther kind lyin' 'round. Sence I come ter think it over I'm 'most believin' that things war set up fur you ter git out, an' me ter be left, bad. I've heard Captain Howl—ef Howl it war—when he war lettin' on ter be right down mad; an' I didn't hear ther jingle ov ther Midford voice, not once. Ez I feel now I'd take three ter one anyhow, thet ther real Walter's back in Blue Blazes; an' that you'll meet him on ther road in, so you kin be sure yer didn't leave him behind. When he an' you got out with a rescuin' party you'd 'a' found Howl skipped, an' Four Horse Frank hangin' by ther neck. An' that's why I war askin' whar Mr. More come in at."

"And a very natural subject for inquiry, ah, um!" replied that gentleman, whose nerves had recovered their balance.

"This young lady has not made me fully her confidant, but I think I understand."

Then More told his story, about as he had told it to Marion; and the three took up the line of march together. More than once Marion looked askance at her singular hero; but with rare prudence she said no more about the Midford complication. She did not exactly doubt the man who had come so opportunely to her rescue at the crest of the pass, but as Frank had given her a hint it might be as well for her to offer or ask for no further explanations until she had a chance for a private interview.

At best Frank was something of a puzzle. If he was really disguised as she more than half-thought, then he had the look of the Midfords in his face, and especially in his eyes. If he was not disguised he looked like nobody but himself, and it was hard to say whether he was old or young, handsome or hardened.

And yet, Marion was rather inclined to the belief that he was handsome.

Outside of this reticence, the three appeared cordial enough; the sport gave a condensed account of his escape—adding, that if Howl knew this country better than he did, he might expect to keep him in a mountain pocket by shutting up one end; but for Four Horse Frank, there was always more than one way out of the woods.

When Marion was almost ready to faint, and they were not more than a couple of miles from Blue Blazes, John More dropped out of the procession, somewhat to the surprise of the others.

"As it will do you no good, and may do me some harm, if you have no objections—ah, um! I will just sit down here awhile. You see"—and he took snuff a little nervously under the sharp look of the sport—"it may be all the better if I'm not mixed up in this affair. If anything further happens that you need my assistance, it is not so likely there will be anything in the way—ab, um!"

"Suit yerself, old man," replied Frank. "You ain't ez much sand ez I thort, but we won't quarrel. I'll see you later."

Neither Frank nor Marion expected any interruption to their journey now, and they would have thought nothing of it if they had known or remembered that the little trail they were following led right past the office of Colonel Wildmont, or that the manager of the Crack Claim Tunnel and Trump Card Mine was glancing at them through the window as they approached.

Then, out he sprung, just as they were opposite to the door, and with the hammers of his revolvers back, he covered Four Horse Frank as he shouted:

"You, there, hands up! Don't you move another step. I've got you covered, and I command you, in the name of the law, to surrender."

Coming, as it did, on the heels of his experiences of the past night, the order was one that might well startle the sport, and lead him to instinctive resistance. About nine men out of ten would have made some offensive movement as they wheeled; or else thrown up their hands as commanded.

Frank did neither. He swung around carelessly, and looked his challenger over without evincing either fear or anger.

"What's ther matter with you? Er has Blue Blazes put on a new marshal? I don't see, anyhow, that it's your say; an' ef I war you, I'd put that gun down afore somebody gits hurt. Show yer warrant, er git off ther roof."

"It takes no warrant to arrest an outlawed criminal with a price on his head, and in Blue Blazes I write my own warrants. Twice you have escaped, and this last time, we believe, have put another murder on your record. At least, it looks like it; and we'll have you answer for that before we send you away where justice may not be quite so certain."

"That's talk with ther bark on; but ther' ain't much solid wood behind it. I've bin willin' ter answer 'bout this hyer nonsense ez Belshazzar hez bin wringin' in on Blue Blazes ef you jest hold on ter me long enuf ter give me a chance. That's bin my platform; an' I'm on it yit."

"Surrender, then; or take the consequences. I'll see that this time you are put where you will stay until wanted. When a man is at the other end of the Trump Card, with my boys in front of him, I'll vouch for it that we can hold him until he is wanted."

"Er a leetle longer—pervided ther ghosts don't kerry him off. Glad yer showed yer hand in time. I ain't goin' inter no tunnel, an' don't yer disremember. I'm grin' on inter Blue Blazes, an' while I'm livin' thar it'll be at ther Grand Occidental. If I don't it'll be cold ernuf ter put on a wooden overcoat, an' take a front seat in ther cemetery. I'll surrender ter Belshazzar Brick, fur I'm gittin' used ter him, an' you kin hook yer fin in mine an' go 'long ter see thet it's all did fair an' squar'. But don't you crowd me now er ther hull team 'll sail in, an' ther big dog come out from under ther wagon."

Perhaps it was fortunate for Four Horse Frank that Colonel Wildmont and he were not alone together. When it only takes the pressure of a finger to send certain death, being an expert don't help much the man that is covered. And Wildmont was another expert himself; and had watched the Four Horse Sport too keenly to allow him to get on even terms.

At the same time the colonel remembered that there were two men just behind him, who might make very uncomfortable witnesses if he shot down the man in cold blood, and before any serious attempt at resistance had been made.

Still aiming one revolver, Wildmont drew from his vest a whistle, and putting it to his lips blew a long, trilling blast.

"Resistance, young man, 'will be madness. There are twenty men in the tunnel that will be here in a moment. You had better surrender to me before they come. They believe that you killed your other guard last night, and almost murdered Belshazzar Brick. As my prisoner you will have fair play. As their's—rope is dangerously handy here, and if once their passions are raised, you ought to be able to guess what the result will be."

"Hullsale slaughter an' deestruction, eh, kunnel? Bet you a dollar your game don't work, an' thet I take ther cake. Shoot me ef you dare! Thar's a man behind you ez hez yer kivered; an' if you pick trigger it's a sure thing you drop."

"That's about the length and breadth of it, colonel. You would hardly expect a Montmorenci to stand by and see a cold-blooded murder. And our family always strikes in on the weaker side."

The little detective came forward as he answered Frank's appeal.

"Murder! What are you talking about? This man is a criminal; and I call upon you to help me in his arrest. Ah! My men are coming now. Down with him, boys! It is the fellow that got away with Belshazzar last night!"

The crowd was coming with a rush, and two men or three against it would have but little chance; to say nothing of the drop that Colonel Wildmont held.

Only there was a new arrival that came ahead of the rush. Panting, breathless, but very much alive to the occasion, Belshazzar Brick dashed up in the rear of the sport, and with a revolver in either hand, thrust an arm each side of his neck, the one weapon turned at the gang of miners, the other at Wildmont.

"He's my pris'ner!" he shouted.

"I'm ther Bailiff ov Blue Blazes, an' I'll hold his body, er lay er corpse. You know me. What Belshazzar Brick sez are swore to."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE COLONEL DECIDES TO WAIT FOR A NEW DEAL.

NOTHING could have been more opportune than the appearance of Belshazzar Brick. He was only one man, to be sure, but that man was an embodiment of about all the law that Blue Blazes so far knew anything about.

There were men in the gang that came rushing up in response to his whistle who would have obeyed any order Wildmont gave them; but there were others who would want to have time to think twice before they attempted to defy the marshal.

It was, however, with the colonel that the arrival of Belshazzar had the most influence,

He had rather felt grateful to Sinclair and the little detective for being present, since they were witnesses that he had simply tried to arrest Four Horse Frank in the name of the law. If some of those he called upon to assist him should turn out over-zealous it would be a pity, but there would be nothing to blame him for.

But when Brick came he had to either identify himself with the lynchers, or give up his prisoners.

He chose the latter—though he did not yet let up on the advantage he had been holding.

"Don't get excited, Belshazzar," he coldly answered, never appearing to notice the leveled weapon that menaced him.

"If the young man will surrender to you—and you are certain that you will be able to hold him—I can assure you I have not a wish to interfere. I stopped him as any other good citizen should do, until the disappearance of your deputy, last night, is cleared up, and we are sure that he is not wanted the other side of the mountains. My men shall go no further, if they have an assurance that he will receive an honest examination, and suffer for his crime if he proves guilty."

"Good enough!" said Belshazzar, heartily.

"But, fur a minnit it did seem ter me's ef your men war going ter sail in, regardless. I'll jest take him along now, an' much glad I be ter hit on my man right hyer. Come along, youngster. You ain't puttin' on frills with yer uncle Belshazzar. Third time's the charm, an' this time you kin bet I don't git nigh to a winder."

"And Maurice Montmorenci will just go along to see fair play," said the little detective, stepping forward.

"After what has happened it might be unpleasant for this gentleman if I remained about him. Somehow, he don't seem to be charmed with my society. I tell you, Belshazzar, he's a dangerous man, and ought to be looked after. He made some fearful threats because my friend Sinclair, and I, asked a few questions in the way of business, about the men that took the Crack Claim Mine in the start, and were killed when the Trump Card Tunnel caved in. If he don't know anything about it what's the use of his gettin' mad?"

"He tells nothing but the truth, sir-ab. For a moment I was sure that both of our lives were in danger, ah; and I was about to rush for your protection. But, ah, I thought that I saw a lady—not the one in there—it may be as well to see, sir-ab, that she is not left unprotected in the neighborhood of these, ah, ruffians."

Gerald Sinclair's interruption was not altogether acceptable to Sonny Sharp, for he gave the young man a look that set him to fumbling with his eye-glasses in considerable confusion.

The mischief was done, however, and without any seeming possible benefit to come from it. The strange look that had lingered in the face of the marshal for a moment after Sharp's statement had vanished, and he was again only intent on his prisoner.

Marion, it is true, had disappeared; but Four Horse Frank—and perhaps the colonel—knew well enough where she had gone to. When the revolvers went up she went off—as fast as she could in the direction of Blue Blazes. She did not see that she could do any good by remaining; and was inclined to believe that, with her escort out of the way, the colonel might turn his attention to her.

At any rate, she was by this time so far on her way that it was impossible to make her disappear without a pretty clear case of how she went, and she was allowed to reach the Grand Occidental without molestation.

When Belshazzar started with his prisoner there was a strong chance that the whole of the Crack Claim contingent would go along. As every man of it was giving free vent to his opinions, and they all agreed that the prisoner ought to be hung, the following did not seem particularly desirable. Frank could see that they only needed a word from the colonel to bring on an attack, and since he had set the ball rolling he would not have been surprised if it had been kept going.

Nevertheless the colonel did not give the orders. He kept silent a moment; and if, in that time, an attack had been made upon the marshal and his prisoner, it is pretty sure that he would have allowed the gang to get away from him.

But Belshazzar didn't want it, and wouldn't have it.

"Much obleeged fur it, gents, an' this are a free an' independent country, which I can't object ef yer wants ter knock off work an' go down ter town; but I don't like ter be crowded. Ef you please, don't git too close, ez he might feel encouraged fur ter make a break. An' ef ther kunnel would jest kinder take ther lead, an' see ez thet I hev things ez I want 'em, he'll be doin' a service ter law an' order, an' to Belshazzar Brick."

The colonel accepted the hint.

"There is a good deal of sense in what the marshal says," he said.

"As far as the work goes, I don't care whether that is stopped or not. It won't suffer in the mine half as much as the good name

of the town would if a lawless spirit should get afloat in there; and that might happen if the mob saw such a fine nucleus, all ready without the trouble of forming it. If you want to go to town, take my advice and go as usual, by twos and threes, and not in an army. It will be time enough for that when you are certain that justice is not going to be done; and with Mr. Brick at the front, you can hardly have any real fears of that."

Colonel Wildmont never talked very loud to his men, and when he gave them a nod, it always went as far as it was seen. He seemed to be even more in earnest than usual, and so his words were not thrown away. The men fell back and allowed the marshal and his prisoner, attended by Gerald Sinclair and the little detective, to pass on unmolested.

"I meant it, boys," said the colonel, when Brick was fairly out of hearing.

"I can't afford to have any foolishness around here, with three outsiders like them looking on; but there may be some work to do later on. I will expect you to stand by me when I call on you. For the present, it would be all the better if you went back to work, while I find how things move in town. Belshazzar is after that twenty thousand dollars; but if the man has murdered one of our townsmen in cold blood, as seems probable, New Orleans can have its say-so after Blue Blazes gets done with him—if they pay the freight on the body."

The men went back to the mine, and the colonel to the office.

Miss Arnaugh had kept out of sight. With an idea that the affair might end in an impromptu organization of a lynch court, it was hardly discreet for a lady of her profession to intrude on the gathering. Besides, from her position she could see very well, and yet not be seen.

It was something of a surprise to her when she saw the excitement quieted down so completely, at a few words from the marshal, and she greeted the colonel with a dubious smile as he returned to her presence.

"After the growling and grumbling at me, for the yast couple days, it appears to me that you let go of your grip mighty easy."

"And if I hadn't, you would have been cut there in the road, flourishing your firearms at Belshazzar's back, because the man once pulled you out of the drink. No, I didn't care to have an *emeute* here. Just now the man and the woman are both puzzled, and I doubt if they say anything to harm me in the hereafter, before the cyclone hits them. And, unless I mistake the signs in the sky, the storm will be raging by early candlelight. It may be as well for you to know nothing, for the present, of what has happened here, and not to bother your brain with what is going to occur hereafter. When you know the whole truth you will better understand my course with this man. Enough for me that though I first looked at him as a troublesome detective merely, I found him worth a fortune to me—and you."

"And I tell you that I would sooner lose a fortune than lift my hand against the man who risked his life to save mine."

Miss Arnaugh retorted hotly, and Wildmont was more concerned than he had been when under cover of Belshazzar's revolvers. He spoke more seriously than ever, and as he spoke he made an effort to take her hand.

"Aileen, another man, who knew you less thoroughly than I, might be jealous. I know that I can trust you as far as living soul can be trusted, and that you would never betray me. Is this man going to come between us? It was very unfortunate that you found out anything about him, for it led you to do what no one else could have done and live. I have passed that over without a word, because I know that when your feelings are once aroused, you act on them without regard to the consequences. How much further do you intend to go in behalf of this detective, who is only too anxious to hound us all to our doom? He came here for that purpose, and unless he is dealt with firmly, I begin to believe that he will succeed."

"Deal with him firmly, then," retorted Miss Aileen, in her airiest manner.

"I have canceled my particular indebtedness and can leave him to his own, sole resources. I will not have lot or part in anything that is to be done against him until I have a great deal better proof than I yet have had, that he would raise his hand against me in any contingency. Perhaps, if it had to be done, I could make as vicious a fight with him as any of you; but for the present all I ask is to be left out of the fracas, and I promise you that I will not interfere."

"I am glad to hear you say so, and I have no fear that you do not mean it. If you ask to be relieved of all connection with what must follow, it may be best not to tell you too much of what has gone before. I might give you a very simple explanation of why I have dallied instead of struck, but that would be to open up the whole subject. It is enough to say that for various reasons he will hesitate to attack me himself, even if he has found out as much as I have reason to believe, and that he will use his influence with that girl to have her remain quiet

until they can see further into a point or two that must seem mysterious. While he is hesitating I will be striking."

"But if you are going away from Blue Blazes why strike at all? I do not attempt to dissuade you, but I ask you the question."

"Because, if you must know it, this man stands between me and a fortune. With him out of the way, and his death proven, there are possibilities worth a dozen uninterrupted years as Captain Howl, and equal even to those of the Trump Card. And I do not give up the latter by any means."

"All right. I shall always think it a great pity the luck of the Crack Claim did not come before we got into the road-agent mix—but otherwise I can't say that I have any great regrets. You know the best of me, and the worst; and I suppose I understand you only too well for my own peace of mind. Run the game out to suit the strength of your hand, and you will find me with you to the end. I have a presentiment that we will both come to grief; but what of that? A short life and a merry one. Ours has not been as short as it might have been; and there has been considerable merriment scattered along on the way. Well, if you have no further information for yours truly, I may as well be getting back to town. Good-by, old precious. I suppose that we might both be a great deal better, but as long as we are all the world to each other, as it is, what would be the use?"

Then this singular young lady kissed the colonel, he consenting, and having mounted her steed, scampered away at a great rate, leaving him to his own reflections, which were not altogether unpleasant, in spite of the delicate condition of his affairs.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ROARING ROB ENTERS THE GAME—TO STAY.

AFTERWARD it seemed strange enough to Sonny Sharp that he, who usually saw everything, saw nothing of Miss Lytton, when he followed out of the office in the wake of Colonel Wildmont. She was not a dozen yards away, and moving slowly. If she had looked back and recognized him in his character of Maurice Montmorenci, it is very likely that she would have returned. It made no great difference that neither saw the other, but it would have at least relieved their minds.

Four Horse Frank said nothing that could enlighten him. When the detective drew a little closer, and attempted to ask a question or two that seemed to have some bearing on the cause of his mysterious disappearance of the night before, Frank looked over his shoulder at him with a quizzical smile.

"In ther language ov ther Dutchman, 'You dells me no quesdions I asks you no lies.' Just you wait tell we git under kiver, an' I'll talk like a house afire; but I ain't ready fur it yet. There's a heap ov thinkin' ter be did, an' I can't spare ther time better than right now. An' ther sooner we git inter town ther sooner you kin git Miss Lytton's side ov ther yarn."

After that he remained mute.

Belshazzar himself was doing a good bit of thinking, and so led the way in silence, steering a straight course for the cabin of Dandy Webb.

For a wonder Dandy was not only at home, but in a bad humor. He stood in the door as Belshazzar approached, and gave no sign of wanting to get out of the way.

"Excuse me, Belshazzar, but what are you goin' ter do with that duck, this time?"

Dandy asked his question as though he might have a purpose behind it.

"Goin' ter take him in thar, an' keep my all both two eyes on him till we git aboard ov ther stage; an' I want you ter russel around an' git Roarin' Rob, an' about half a dozen more ov that gang, ter help. It's big wages an' a comfortable time that they will be having."

"Roarin' Rob goes, all right; but where did yer say this little jamboree war to take place?"

"Right in thar, Dandy; right in thar."

"Not if I know it, an' I guess I'm not wide off. See here, old man, this here are all ther house I got. You kin make yerself at home in it jest as much as you have a mind to, but you can't bring in any such bad medicine as him."

"Oh, come now, Dandy. It's ther best I kin do. Ef I don't come in hyer, what the thunder am I to do?"

"Take him right along over to ther Occidental. They kin afford to lose their shebang; but blest if I can spare mine. He's bu'sted the jail, burned your shanty down, and ef I let him in he'd fly away with me, cabin, claim and all. Not any of him in mine, not a drop."

Webb took his notions now and then; and when he did he was more obstinate than a dozen mules. Brick knew there was no use in arguing with him, and it was not safe to try to force a way in. He turned sorrowfully away, and not thinking of anything better, took the advice of Dandy, and started for the Grand Occidental. Jefferson Scrabble was not superstitious, and anybody was good enough medicine for him as long as he had money.

Jefferson, moreover, was not averse to a crowd. Save a little game of poker now and then, for amusement, no cards were played in the house; but there was a bar connected with

the establishment, and it was the finest furnished one of any in the camp. A crowd brought money to his coffers, and that was what he wanted there.

The news that Belshazzar had again arrested the so strangely vanishing sport, and the appearance of the bailiff and his prisoner came so closely together that Jefferson had not lost his enthusiasm, and he seemed to take it as a personal favor.

Belshazzar was not thinking of doing any one a favor, but he was doing a good deal of thinking, all the same. His eyes never left the prisoner, though he had pocketed his weapons, and seemed in no fear of any attempt to escape.

Four Horse Frank was concerned only for his dinner. He had eaten nothing since the night before, and there was an aching void within that he was in haste to fill. Fortunately he did not have long to wait, and he surrounded his meal in a way that showed that his captivity and his appetite agreed very well together.

The bailiff sat opposite to him at the table, a revolver lying convenient to his elbow; but, to the surprise of those who were spectators, the sport had not been disarmed. There was a revolver stuck in his boot—the one he had taken from Captain Howl—and the butt of a derringer protruded from the pocket in his vest that was made for its accommodation. It looked like a piece of carelessness, or a bit of temptation. From the way the marshal eyed his man it might be that he was only waiting for him to make an effort at resistance or escape, so that he might have an excuse to drop him in his tracks.

"Belshazzar's getting tired," thought the sports, "and means to have his Injun good—and dead."

By the time dinner was over Dandy Webb made his appearance, bringing Roaring Rob and one or two of his friends.

Rob did not seem charmed with the honor conferred on him.

He met the procession as it was adjourning from the dinner-table, and spoke his mind without reserve.

"Dog-gone ir, Belshazzar, what's this you're givin' me? It ain't white, an' you oughter know it. Ef I war chippin' at all I'd be chippin' on ther other side; an' I jest come hyer ter let yer know it. D'yer think I'm ther kind ter stand over my side-pard, ez he war in ther leetle frolic we had down at Hank's, an' shoot ef he tried ter skip? You may be marshal, an' bailiff, an' boss ov Blue Blazes, but you ain't boss ov Roaring Rob—an' that's me, every time. Ef you want some one ter do yer dirty work, tackle Kunnel Wildmont, er some ov his kid-glove gang. I ain't that kind, and when you ain't on duty I'm goin' ter crawl all over yer, an' I'd do it just now for a half-cent piece, or chaw ov that 'buy-me an' I'll do yer good' terbacker, that I ain't seen for forty year. An' you want me ter act ez yer deputy-cornstable? Why, dog-blast yer! Ef I see'd him a-gittin' away in good style I'd jest be sayin', go it, ole hoss! An' mebbe I'd be punchin' yer head while he went, beca'se I seen ther chance. That's ther style ov a hairpin I be—hedn't we better say good-by afore somebody gits ther mad up?"

This oration was not all made at one time, however. Rob began it in the hall, but as Brick just moved his prisoner along as though he neither saw or heard him, he backed out of the way to allow the two to proceed, and then followed Belshazzar into the room he had procured for his headquarters while he stayed in camp.

He finished the speech while standing at the door, and then braced himself for what might come. It might be that Frank had no desire to escape; but if he had Rob had given more than a hint that he could have a good deal more than his best wishes.

If any one, a week before, had taken the side of Four Horse Frank so emphatically, it is more than a conjecture that the bailiff would have shot him, to provide against the future; and Rob really was disappointed that he did not become raving mad, at the very least.

On the contrary, the bailiff seemed rather pleased than otherwise, and calmly listened to the very plain talk.

"Jest shut ther door, Rob, an' you an' me kin talk it over. When we git through you won't hev yer mad up more ner half so high. Them's jest why I picked yer out; an' ef yer stays with me, I wouldn't wonder ef yer hed a chance fur a fly at them same kid-glove fellers, an' ther gang up at ther Crack Claim throwed in. I ain't furgittin' thet he's done bloody murder, an' ther rope are waitin' fur him; but ez a sworn officer, I'll hold on to him, er kill half ther town."

"What's he talkin' about?" asked Rob, turning to the prisoner, who was listening to the conversation as if he had no concern in it, but was getting a good deal of amusement.

"Is he givin' it to me anywhere near straight? If he is, you kin jest count thet Roarin' Rob'll stay by you, tell ther last horn blows."

"Straight ez a string, but how he got ther pints into his crazy noddle beats me. Ef you stay by me an' Belshazzar, it's better than even money that you'll have a chance ter come up to ther help ov ther law ag'in' the mighty."

"Then I'm stayin'! Put her thar, pard, put her thar, fur keeps. I jest want one good chance at the kunnel with ther law on my side, er a reason that don't mean a bemp necktie fur an answer, an' then I'm ready ter jump ther camp, an' go somewheres else."

He caught the hand of the bailiff with one of his, and slapped the other one into it with a heartiness that was heard outside, and made them almost think that the shooting had begun in earnest. At the same time it gave the sport a chance to make one of his disappearances if he wanted to. There was an open window convenient to his elbow, and a mustang was tied to a post but a few yards away.

Belshazzar showed neither anger nor anxiety. He shook the hand that imprisoned his own in a way that was solemnly impressive, while he stared into Rob's face. The prisoner gave him no concern—it was the men that were after the prisoner that he had to guard against.

"I ain't sayin' thet you'll see Wildmont in front, but ef he won't be egg'in' 'em on I'm away off. It's kinder comin' back ter me—what war goin' on in ther cabin, ther other night—an' it looked ter me then, ef I did see straight, thet if this sport hedn't spoke when he did I might hev passed in my checks. Thar's a despr'it gang seems ter be after him, an' Belshazzar ain't ez dumb ez he looks. He's bin puttin' things ter-gether, an' gittin' ready fur a gen'ral clean-up. Ef—ef—this man hedn't bin so dead sure I'd begin—I would now—ter think mebbe he warn't my man, after all. Four Horse Frank ez I knowed him—he didn't hev no sich nerve. An' yit it's him, face, vice, an' figger, jest as I knowed him long ago."

Considerable of a change had come over the bailiff in the last couple of days, for him to be willing to trifle with his convictions in such a way. He was as earnest as ever about doing his duty, but the personal part of the matter was beginning to slip out of sight.

At the hesitating words of the marshal, in regard to his prisoner, Rob looked more closely at them both.

He saw that the sport was surveying the bailiff thoughtfully, and that there was no anger in his face, at the persistent way in which Belshazzar had been following him up, nor was there much of the criminal look about him just then.

"Blame me ef I don't think it's Four Horse Frank, after all," he muttered, under his breath. "Ef Belshazzar are a leetle shaky sometimes in his upper story, he does hit it big when he bez ther pins ter roll fur. But, dog-gone it, it can't be him, hisself, either; er else he never growed old. I don't keer who he be; though I'm stayin' with him tell ther last horn toots."

He made this last reflection with a shake of the head so emphatic that he would have certainly revealed his purpose to Belshazzar if the latter had been looking in his direction. Perhaps he thought he might have done something of the kind, for he hastily added, aloud:

"We ain't got to ther end ov this bank yit, old man; but tell you do you kin count me an' my pards ez bein' on your side. Now, while you're thinkin' it all up, s'pose I go out an' hunt fur a few ov my gang. Ther' won't be nothin' crooked on hand afore dark, an' we'll be good an' ready when they begins ter start."

"That'll do fur me, but you send Dandy in. There's some one wants this chap bad; but while I'm at ther front they don't get him."

"Durned queer," thought Rob, as he went out to gather up his contingent.

"I'd think Belshazzar was wild ef they hedn't carted the sport off twice. He ain't bin explainin' jest ez much ez he might how he got away, an' who hed him—but that goes with ther rest. I'm stayin' behind ther bailiff. It looks as though him and ther sport both hed some new ideas; and I sw'ar I hev one onless I'm goin' clean crazy. But who'll b'lieve it when ther truth turns up?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW FANCY WAS FOUND.

THE men from the Crack Claim kept to their work. At least, none of them were seen in the town; and as the majority of the citizens were at work also, and there was no one to take a leading part in stirring up popular excitement, there was very little to indicate that a storm was brewing.

There was a drift of the idle in the direction of the Grand Occidental, but it was curiosity only, that drew them thitherwards; and Roaring Rob, who spent the balance of the day in scouting around, heard nothing to justify the strong suspicions that Belshazzar had confided to him. He did not neglect his promise, however, but gave half a dozen of the men he trained with, and who were more or less under his influence, a hint that there might be fun afloat that night; and, in case there was, they should be on the spot, and ready to take their orders from him. He dropped in on the marshal about dark, and found that he, Dandy and the prisoner were just beginning a game of draw, with a five-dollar limit, and that there was nothing new to learn. He looked over Frank's shoulder for a little, understood that the sport's parole had been accepted until the following morning,

and then went away, half-convinced that he had been the victim of a ghost story of the rankest kind.

As he came out he met one of his aides, who looked up eagerly.

"It's all ez flat ez cakes an' beer, in thar, an' like ez not ther hull fun are dished. You tell ther gang to be around an' waitin' ter hear me howl, an' ef it's a sell I'll fill yer all up, full ez goats, an' we'll say no more about it. I'm goin' 'round to ther Spotted Dog now, an' after that I'll look in at Hank's. Ef thar's any devilment a-brewin', hanged ef I don't think it'll hatch at ther Lair."

At the Spotted Dog things were more than ordinarily quiet, and Johnny Wardle was looking around ruefully at the slim attendance. Rob did not tarry long, and when he left turned his steps in the direction of the Lair.

After the adventures of a few nights before, Rob knew that he would not be wildly welcomed by Hank, and it was more than likely that if there was nothing more interesting on foot the crowd might turn their attention to him. For that reason he approached somewhat cautiously, and entered quietly.

Everything appeared to be going on as usual, though there was a bigger turnout than was customary, so early in the evening.

No attention was given to the intruder, who quietly lost himself in the crowd. If there was any move on foot no one spoke of it, though the fact of the sport having been recaptured, and the possible disposition of him was more than once alluded to.

"Blamed funny where Fancy went to," suggested one, whom Rob did not remember as a regular attendant at the Lair.

"Belshazzar's here, and the sport that has raised all the racket is here, but we don't hear nothing of him. And as far as I've heard, the sport ain't saying a word about where he's been, or where he's left him. Mebbe he don't like to tell why he comes back, an' Fancy don't."

"Don't fret yourself about Fancy," responded one of the listeners.

"He's one of the kind that takes mighty good care of himself. I guess the stranger got up to stretch himself, and Fancy hasn't got done running yet."

"Hold on, there! He's no pard of mine, and he's a trifle off color in this camp, but nobody ever said yet that Fancy wasn't game, and I wouldn't begin it just now, when it looks as though he might have got his gruel; and not by fair play, either."

The first speaker seemed to be very much in earnest, and those that heard him—save the one doubter who had aired his aspersions—nodded gravely.

"Oh, fer that matter, when he met an ordinary man, that he didn't know was his boss, he had sand enough. But this stranger, that calls himself Four Horse Frank, isn't an ordinary man. He handled Fancy just as easy as if he was mauling a baby; and he can do it every day in the week. My idea is that the sport went to go fer Fancy, and Belshazzar tried to interfere. Then the sport tipped our marshal a hot one, that laid him out cold fer awhile, and then Fancy ran away, with the sport after him. If Fancy had a hundred yards start there ain't a man in the mines that could catch him. When the four horse man got tired he quit and came back. He has gall enough fer anything, and I'm open to odds that he'll get away with Belshazzar three or four more times before he gets done laughin' at him."

"Yes, if he and the marshal aren't in caboots. Somehow, it seems to me there's some kind of a gum game about this."

"Dry up, will you?" broke in another, giving the speaker a push. "What's that they're saying, over at the door?"

A man had come rushing in, and he evidently labored under some excitement.

"They've found him, gentlemen, found him, and he's dead as Julius Caesar."

"Found who?" was the question of a dozen voices. Every man at that end of the room was interested at once; and the contagion spread rapidly.

"The man that set up with the marshal last night, and that's been missing all day. The sport must have got away with him and then got scared and lit out. What he came back for just beats me; unless he thought he had the stiff hid so no one could find it. He tried to bury him in a bunch of mesquites; but it must have been too dark to see what he was doing. He didn't get ground enough on him to cover a rabbit. But there's going to be an awful row about it—see if there don't."

"Row, nothin'! Unless it's like ther han'le ov a jug—all on one side. Whoopee! Whar's yer rope?"

A fellow known as Ugly Jackson got in the first returns, and the balance of the voters, as far as heard from, seemed to go the same ticket. The news-carrier caught his breath again while public sentiment was being expressed; and then added the balance of his information.

"It was a murder, for a fact. The whole back part of his head is stove in; and it was done so quick and foul that the poor fellow never knew what hurt him. They're bringing him right

along down the street, and I wouldn't wonder if they fetched him in here."

"I guess not."

Red Hank had been listening quietly, and now he spoke up calmly, but as though he meant pistols and knives, if his word was disputed.

"Oh, come now, Hank! When Judge Lynch begins to talk we little fish want to sing small. It ain't pleasant to have a corpse in the house, but what's the difference, anyhow? There'll be no business going, unless its in the way of drinks, until this thing is settled, one way or another. If they take him along to the Spotted Dog you may as well close up your shutters for to-night. The drinking goes with the body, and holding court is mighty thirsty work—don't you forget it."

This original sort of a view of the advantages of having a body in the house reconciled the saloon-keeper somewhat, especially as he saw the stampede that was taking place.

As soon as they were certain that there was nothing more to be learned nearly every man there gave a hitch at his pistol and rushed off to meet the procession it was understood was approaching.

The luckless Fancy had been found as stated sure enough. Two men had been out hunting—with an eye also, to finding the trail that ought to lead in some direction from the burned cabin.

Chance favored them. As they came back toward the camp, and, of course, totally unaware of the rearrest of Four Horse Frank, they saw a few tracks.

They followed them carefully, even though they hardly expected they were to bring them to a revelation. When they saw what seemed to be a few drops of blood they grew keener on the scent; but avowed that they were totally unprepared for what they found in among the mesquites. They hurried to the camp, summoned the nearest men to their aid, and so the body of the unfortunate man was carried back to town.

Before it got to the Lair the procession was large and loud. Questions were asked around promiscuously, the answers to which were fully anticipated; and their only object being to get every one tuned up to the same pitch, for one, single purpose.

"Here we've been sitting around all day, doin' nothin'," said one brawny-looking citizen, "an' him a-lyin' out thar, cold an' stiff. What's ther good ov a marshal, ef he ain't up an' a-doin' when thar's such goin's on? Hyer he war, moonin' 'round, about a corpse at New Orleans ten years ago, when he had one right at home. He knowed Fancy war missin'; what's ther reason he didn't ask whar he'd left him, when he pulled the sport? An' ef he'd furtog all about losin' a depity, what's ther reason somebody else didn't 'member, an' go down to ther Occidental an' snatch it out ov him? Oh I tell yer, ef we hedn't bin blind ez Belshazzar I'd say thar war somethin' crooked 'bout this thing."

"Mebbe he tackled ther sport an' kept what he hed ter say to hisself. How does that strike yer?"

"An' mebbe him an' ther sport pooled their issues an' went fur Fancy tergether. Everybody knows he allers kerried a wad wuth liftin'; an' thar wa'n't a sign ov it 'round where he war rolled onter ther sand?"

"An' ther sport's jest rollin' in wealth! Oh, ef thar's any men in Blue Blazes, they won't let this drop hyer! Ef Belshazzar gits his man away in ther stage to-morrer mornin', we, hyer, orter be hung in their places. Jestice, gentlemen, jestice! Who stands ready ter see it done?"

This man was hitting the string his auditors really wanted to see played upon. The response to the call was so emphatic that the bearers came near throwing the corpse away, and rushing off as avengers.

In a moment, as it were, there was a complete revolution in the actions and feelings of the crowd. From boisterous they became silent. A few whispers ran around from one to another. Half a dozen men separated from the rest, and ran down toward the Grand Occidental. When there they scattered around the building, commanding every avenue of exit; and there they waited. The rest tramped along with the body to Red Hank's, some stopping at the bar; the rest following on into the other room.

Hank's revised opinions enabled him to receive the crowd with courtesy. It did not take him many minutes to find out that the possible was to become a positive. The body had hardly touched the table before half a dozen men with drawn revolvers, were talking fast and loud.

"No use to organize a court till we see what shape we get them in. Half a dozen of the boys are down there now, on the watch, and waiting for us. If we want a hand in the picnic we had better hop along, or it may be over before we get there. They're not of the waiting kind."

No one knew exactly who had spoken; but the idea hit them all exactly. With a savage roar the crowd surged out into the street, and started pell-mell for the Grand Occidental. If there was anything in numbers and determination, Four Horse Frank's little frolic seemed destined to come to a serious ending.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE COMMITTEE CALLS.

THERE was just one thing the crowd lacked when starting out on the war-path. They had leaders enough—too many of them. What they needed was a leader with brains. Forty or fifty men may be all very much in earnest about the same thing, and yet not work together at all.

The general idea seemed to be that Four Horse Frank should be hung anyhow; but that Belshazzar ought to be allowed to prove his innocence—if he could. Everybody understood this much; but nothing was settled as to how the undertaking was to be carried out.

When they reached the Occidental, they found the scouts on guard; and they had not been altogether wasting their time, since they had taken their stations. They knew the very room in which Frank, Belshazzar, and Dandy Webb were seated, playing at cards, and pointed it out.

"I wouldn't be too rapid," advised one of these sentinels, who had found time to think it all over.

"You go to rushing in thar an' you get up a riot, straight off the handle. Better let a committee go up and wait on 'em—tell 'em, with the compliments of Blue Blazes, that we'd like to talk the matter over, and won't they please step down to the door. Then you can take 'em as you want 'em."

"That's level," answered several voices; "but where's your committee?"

"I'm one!"

"Me too!" added two or three voices.

"An' I'm another!" chimed in Roaring Rob, speaking along with the rest who were anxious for front seats. He had been saying enough already to make him solid with the crowd.

"But yer don't want ter be lettin' off too much beforehand. Like ez not he's got his scouts out now. Belshazzar ain't no man's fool; an' ef he knowed what was up he'd hev about six answers in each hand, an' he'd shake 'em out at ther committee in a way they wouldn't jest be gone on."

The suggestion had so much truth behind it that the nominations for the committee came more slowly; or, rather, they ceased altogether.

If there had been any doubt in the minds of the men from the Lair, in regard to Rob's good faith, this advice, by the way, would have gone far to remove it. He was not exactly the man they expected to see training with their crowd; but as he and Belshazzar had passed a few words at the Spotted Dog, at the time of the riot over the musicians, it was not altogether a surprise.

It was now too late to attempt any great secrecy; but the committee was graciously allowed to take the lead. With two or three revolvers covering the window of the room in which Belshazzar was known to be, and the crowd of determined men surrounding the house, so that a cat could not get away unseen, the committee, consisting of five of the most active of the crowd, jammed themselves past Jefferson Scrabble, who was meekly standing in the front door, seeking for some information as to the purpose of the besiegers, and tramped heavily along the hall to the door of Belshazzar's room.

A thundering knock brought an immediate response from within.

"Hello, thar! Don't bu'st ther door down! Who are yer; an' what do yer want?"

"We're a committee, Belshazzar, 'p'inted by these people ov Blue Blazes. T'ings hev bu'st out in a new place, an' are all goin' ter sticks. We want ter hev a talk with yer, an' ef you'll jist open ther door an' step out we kin fix things in no time."

"Ther door's not locked, an' ther committee kin open it, an' talk through ther hole till they're blind; but me, an' Dandy hyer, an' ther pris'nar, hez jest got to an' centerestin' part ov ther game, an' can't quit fur Blue Blazes—er Brimstone either. Ez long ez I'm watchin' this chap I'm doin' my duty, an' that's all thet kin be expected. You kin see how it is, yer-selves."

The committee looked at each other, all trying to gather inspiration and information except Rob, who lifted the latch, and softly pushed the door open, so that all could see what was going on inside.

The players were seated around three sides of a little table at the other end of the room. Belshazzar was facing the door, his cocked revolver lying ready to his right hand, and Dandy's lay beside it. On the left of the marshal sat Four Horse Frank, his coat off, and looking as little as possible like a man that was in danger of his life.

"Now, see hyer, Belshazzar, this ain't no way ter treat ther camp," said Ugly Jackson, holding his pistol behind him and slipping his thumb on the hammer, his voice growing harsher as he proceeded.

"We made ther marshal, but we kin mighty soon onmake him. We're lettin' yer down easy ez we kin; but when we say come, you've got ter start, an' that's ther end ov it. Ther bull town are 'round this house, an' Fancy's stiff are up at Hank's. We're waitin' ter take you an' that long-haired sport up ter see what's ter be

done. Ef yer don't keer ter go peaceable—why, we're goin' ter bring yer right along with all both ov yer boots on. You sabber?"

Jackson was a bad man as long as he held any advantage, and he thought he held the advantage just now. His pistol was out and cocked, ready to raise and fire at the first movement by Belshazzar or the two men with him. As he had no doubt that the rest of the committee would back him up for whatever they were worth, he imagined that he had the bailiff in a box, and could afford to talk as big as he knew how.

Four Horse Frank went on with his deal as though he had not heard a word of the speech, and Belshazzar was just as unconcerned, though on second thought, as he picked up his cards, he cast a glance over them.

"Ugly, ye'r gittin' entirely too big fer yer boots. This are a private room, an' jest now sacred to ther law. When you git tired talkin', you kin go 'way; ef you try ter come in hyer, I'll down you, sure. Blue Blazes kin wait."

Then he returned his attention to the game, waiting with as much interest on Dandy Webb's say-so as though there were no nooses dangling in the distance, and no crowd of excited citizens waiting to see their measures taken.

As a specimen of pure bluff, or number one nerve, all this was perfect; but the crowd outside was not taking it in, and grew impatient.

Ugly Jackson heard the swelling shouts, and the voices of half a dozen at the end of the hall: "If he won't come alive, say the word, an' we'll fetch the cold meat. Too much foolin' in thar, an' we ain't goin' ter stand it no longer."

Ugly looked at the trio within, and gave one more warning.

"Hands up, Belshazzar, an' you other Mister Man! You hear 'em outside? They want you bad, and we're going to take you. Ef you move, ther flume's ready, an' you'll take quick passage."

And with pistol poised, Ugly Jackson raised his foot to step inside.

Just then the treachery of Roaring Rob showed itself.

With a short laugh, he sprang at Jackson, caught him over his hip, flung him into the air to fall headlong to the floor, and then bounded into the room, exclaiming as he came:

"Bluff won't win, Belshazzar! The crowd is coming, and the sooner you're ready fur it, the better. If some one don't climb a tree, there'll be an awful slaughter. There's half a dozen of the Spotted Dog crowd outside, and they're all solid men; but I won't blame 'em ef they hold ther age. You hear 'em howl?"

"Well, Belshazzar, I'm your prisoner," said Frank, quietly looking up. "I'm lookin' to you fur protection; but ef you think it's too heavy to kerry, say ther word. When ther fun begins I'll sail in."

Belshazzar drew himself up stiffly, and stared at the sport like a man struggling with himself. At the overthrow of Ugly Jackson, and the defection of Roaring Rob the balance of the committee had fallen back on the main army. Their explanation was brief, but it gave the men inside a moment of breathing time, and this was the way Brick used it:

"Young man—ef you be a young man—I've bin huntin' one ov your name fur years. Ef you ain't him, you've never sed so. I've hed you several times, an' when I got you I couldn't keep you. Now, when I've hed you to myself I begin ter feel skeered. You talk, talk, talked tell I don't know who I am, er whar I be. In a couple of hours mebbe I'd 'a' bin talked inter turnin' yer loose, an' lettin' yer go. An' me a-yearnin' fur years ter git on yer heavy! I ain't goin' ter hev it so!"

He stamped his foot angrily, and continued: "Ye'r fightin' with a rope on one side, an' death on ther other; an' rope an' death are mine. When I see we've got ter knuckle under, I swar I'll drop yer myself. I've swore I war goin' ter take yer back fur ther gallows, an' ef I can't I'll kill you, sure. Blue Blazes sha'n't—unless ther work's got in afore things look too despr't. I'll save one barrel fur you. Now fight, you infernal cuss; fur here they come!"

"Crazy ez a June bug," said Frank, sadly appealing to Dandy Webb.

"I sed it afore, an' I'll say it ag'in. Ho ain't jest right in his upper story. I hope he's a holy ole fighter, though, when he gits ther chance, fur hyer they be, an' ther ball opens. I'll try one wrinkle on 'em, an' ef they don't laugh, sail in ez you please, an' die fightin'."

CHAPTER XXX.

BRINGING A COMMITTEE TO REASON.

THE position of the four men was about to become as dangerous as it could well be; any resistance really seemed like madness. So far, the greater part of the mob were only anxious to put the neck of the stranger sport into a noose. A few wanted to swing off the bailiff; but there were others who, for the present, would have fought for him, unless he was guaranteed a fair trial. Against Dandy and Roaring Rob, about the only thing to be urged was that they were in bad company.

But the killing of a single man would be enough to doom the entire quartette, since they

could hardly expect to successfully fight the town. They could not well check the coming rush without slaughter; and that once begun the camp would be sure to hang them all. The bailiff had not counted on such a general uprising when he engaged Roaring Rob's services. Without hope of rescue or success, what use was there to struggle? And why bring two more men into the game of death?

Why? Unless Belshazzar was entirely crazy; and Four Horse Frank one of those laughing desperadoes who always take the most unwise course—and live to a good old age in spite of the storms of fire they often court, and never try to avoid?

As a fort, Dandy Webb's cabin would have been much more available, and probably Dandy was wishing that they were all there when the rush came swirling down the hall—to halt suddenly and fall back, with something like a prayer of thankfulness that the shooting had not yet begun. Right in front of them all Four Horse Frank stepped out, with his hands held high above his head.

His hands were not empty, however, and as he stepped he mentioned one word, in a key that reached the ears of everybody, in spite of the racket.

"Dynamite!"

"Don't be alarmed," he continued, as he saw that he had some compulsory auditors, who could not get back through the jam.

"I ain't in fur hullsale slaughter—ef I kin help. An' I never yit war afeard ter stand up to ther rack an' take all I deserved for anything I ever did. But I hate ter be crowded too fast when a town bez its mad up afore it gits ther rights ov things. If I'm not goin' ter hev a show I may ez well take the heft of ther camp along over ther divide. An' unless yer play me fair I'll do it, too."

"What do yer call fair?" croaked Ugly Jackson, who had been thinking that he would give several hundred to know whether or no the cartridges that Frank held would explode, if, willingly or unwillingly the sport should drop them.

"A regular trial an' a dozen good men fur jury. Then proof that I've killed anybody in Blue Blazes. Till then I'll hold on ter cartridges an' sizes; an' ef ther verdict ain't jest ther pure quill mebbe I'll use 'em ter move fur a new trial."

"That's good enough," answered Ugly, as the shortest way out of the dead-lock. "They're waitin' fur ye up at ther Lair; an' all we want is fur you ter come along."

"Don't come wuth a cent. What's ther matter with ther Grand Occidental? Biggest room in town, an' no chance ter knife a man in ther dark. Hev yer court thar, er else all go up ter glory, together. I know what I'm handlin'; you may ez well come down. Ef it warn't fur ther sake ov Belshazzar an' ther men that's backin' him, I wouldn't give yer that much ov a show."

Jackson looked over his shoulder and saw that the way was clear. He requested the sport to wait for a moment, until he could learn the decision of the court, and then backed out of sight.

The movement of Four Horse Frank had been a complete surprise to his friends, and when he turned and re-entered the room he found three men there as strongly moved as the rest of the camp.

"What in ther name of wrath are you doin'?" huskily whispered Roaring Rob. "Do yer want ter murder ther hull ov us?"

"I'm tryin' ter gain time, Robert. Ef I don't succeed you may as well go under one way as another."

"Not much. I'll take mine of old age, every time. You can't hold them up forever; an' sooner or later they're bound ter git yer."

"Mebbe, yes, an' mebbe no. You foller Belshazzar's lead, an' keep quiet. We'll see what they have ter say."

Some one was speaking—it was not Ugly Jackson.

"We'll come ter your terms if you hand your dynamite over to Belshazzar. We'll open court right here, and you can pick your jury, just so that there's not more than half of it takes their drinks at the Spotted Dog. We'll make Belshazzar judge; and, when we get through, what he says goes. How does that strike you?"

"Good as wheat, every time!"

"Then get yourself into the bar-room. The ball is open. If Belshazzar don't toe the mark the camp will attend to his case afterwards."

With a half-whisper Frank turned to Webb and Roaring Rob:

"When they hev ther eyes on us, you two better slide out of ther winder an' jine ther crowd on ther outside."

Then he quietly placed the dynamite in Belshazzar's hands, looking him keenly over as he did so, and the two stepped out.

"Somethin' like old times, ain't it, pard?" he whispered, as they moved down the hall. "Ever han'le that truck afore? Ef yer did I needn't tell yer not ter drop it. It would make a hole hyer, that would beat ther Crack Claim Tunnel, an' clean up ther hull populashun, ter say nothin' ov Four Horse Frank an' his pards."

Belshazzar shook his head. If there was any

hidden meaning he did not appear to understand; and there had been of late so many allusions to Four Horse Frank that the mention of his name no longer excited him as it once did.

"I kin take keer ov it," he said. "What I'm afeard ov is that you bin a-doin' jest what they say, an' ef you have I'll have ter keep my word. I'd a' sooner fit it out; but it war your say so, an' we'll see what it 'mounts to."

Probably there never was a court convened under such circumstances; for Judge Lynch is not apt to dally with his victims, or allow them much choice in the time, place and manner of his proceedings. But then there are very few men perfectly willing to blow themselves and everybody else up in order to obtain an adjournment of the court.

With the prisoner's arm still linked in his, Belshazzar marched directly behind the bar. He placed the dynamite in front of him, flanking it on either side with a revolver, and then declared the court open for the trial of the prisoner, calling for charge and witnesses. That he was included in the free and easy sort of indictment the spectators had drawn up in their minds did not trouble him a particle; and perhaps he was not aware of it.

"Mebbe it ain't no use," said Ugly Jackson, stepping forward, "but half a dozen of ther boys went to Hank's after ther corpse. It would be just like Hank's cussedness not to let it come. While they're lookin' fur it, though, we might be pickin' out a jury. It's all humbug ter bother with it, but a promise are a promise. It won't hurt anything, nobow."

The selection was not as difficult as might have been expected. Roaring Rob was too modest, after what he had done to Jackson, to be a member himself; but he had a couple of his reliable friends named, who he knew would hold out to the last moment in support of the prisoner, if they had the shadow of a point to base their course on.

As all the men proposed were strangers to him, the sport made no objection to any of them. They were a pretty fair looking set, and when they had come forward, and taken their places near the bar, Ugly Jackson stood up as a sort of prosecuting attorney, and suggested that there was no use wasting time in waiting for the corpse—which it was hardly decent to move, anyhow. If it didn't come, any of the jury who had not yet seen it might take a view by and by. And for the first witness, he suggested that the honorable judge should tell what he knew about the case. As he and the prisoner were the last persons known to be with Fancy while the latter lived, their statements certainly ought to throw some light on the murder. Whatever the prisoner might have to say could be heard when he opened his defense.

Jackson reeled this off in quite a professional manner, and Belshazzar responded in perfect good faith. If he saw that he was on the defensive himself he gave no sign, as he gravely told his story.

And a very unsatisfactory one it was, though it was pretty well known beforehand. About all he remembered was, that Fancy seemed to be sitting in the corner, and Four Horse Frank sleeping quietly—then, he was rising from the ground, and staggering toward his burning cabin. He imagined that some one had reached in through the window and choked him into insensibility; but who, or why, he knew not. The prisoner had given certain explanations, but as they were simply hearsay he could not repeat them, unless on re-examination, after Four Horse Frank had told them his own version. He could not say that the accused had not killed Fancy, but he did not believe it. It was not the way it would have been done—looked like the work of robbers; and if he had not his hands full with Four Horse Frank he would look the matter up. Thought it would be a good idea for Blue Blazes to carefully investigate the subject; and was certain that it would be found they were altogether on the wrong tack now.

That was about the substance of Belshazzar's evidence; and the reader knows that it was just as nearly on the line of truth as it was possible for him to get.

"An' now," said Jackson, with a satisfied grin on his face, "we'll hev the word of a man that all but seen the murder done. If it don't plaster the crime right down on ther pris'n'r, whar it b'longs, I wanter know! Jack Briggs, come forwards, an' sing your leetle song."

Jack Briggs was almost a stranger in the town. He had been seen there a couple of times, but as very little was known about him his evidence would perhaps, be the more readily received, even if his countenance was not the most attractive in the world.

He stepped forward, all smiling and then as he raised his empty hand, there was the sharp crack of a revolver somewhere near; and both Belshazzar and the prisoner dropped heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A MISS IS WORSE THAN A MILE—AND DANDY WEBB CARRIES THE NEWS.

"If the man tells his story you are lost."

Colonel Wildmont was the speaker, and Aileen Arnaugh heard what he said.

There were not many loungers, and there were no players when the colonel came in. When the news was brought of the finding of Fancy's body the idlers went off at a hard trot to join the lynch court they understood was about to be organized, thus leaving Wildmont and the female sport alone together.

The colonel was impressive when he spoke, but his words gave Aileen no concern.

"I know the sharp better than you do, and I'll wager my bank against the tailings in the Trump Card sluices that he never once mentions me. I'll admit that it may be inconvenient to have him talk, but not on my account. You fellows that have been wearing masks, disguises, and all that may find yourselves in a peck of trouble; but if I had nothing on my mind but my little conversation the other night with this sport, my slumbers wouldn't be broken very badly."

"Well, little woman, there's nothing like nerve, and I am glad to see that you are not going to weaken. He won't have a chance to talk, so that your confidence won't have a chance to be abused."

"If it wasn't like playing whist with three dummies I'd offer you odds on that. How are you going to stop him?"

"Ahem! The men from the Trump Card were very bitter and very certain, even before the body was found. Now they will have the assistance of all Blue Blazes, and they will hang him off hand."

"Not a bit of it. That's the way the game might work in the mountains, but here it's different. Belshazzar is not the man to let go his gripe, and he has a heap of friends that would back him up if he killed a dozen Fancys. Then your men don't count—or the most of them don't—on leaving Blue Blazes. If they stay here they don't want to show themselves too cold-blooded. It's dollars to dimes that when Four Horse Frank begins to bluff, and Belshazzar—with perhaps half a dozen friends—backs him up, they will compromise by giving him a fair trial, and a sure rope. If they don't—well, as I have told you, I know him of old. Unless his luck has run out he is a mighty bad man to force. You had better have sent ambulances along in with your contingent from the Trump Card. They will be needed, sure."

"Oh, come now! You know that not one man in a million would undertake such a play as that."

"But if he happens to be that man? He'd have your gang down before they began to think of shooting, to say nothing of what the bailiff will be doing when the mob begins to show its teeth. You've had him twice, and yet, there he is."

Colonel Wildmont was, to tell the truth, anxious enough before. The words of the young lady did not soothe his nerves, at any rate.

"If they don't obey orders they will hear from headquarters. I didn't care to be seen moving in this thing; but as the court has, by this time, been convened and Judge Lynch appointed, I think I may run the risk, and go down and see."

To his surprise and disgust, the colonel found that not only was the Lair deserted, the bar in charge of a tender and Hank Missing, but that the Four Horse sport was said to be running things after his own style at the Grand Occidental. The one man had successfully bluffed the town!

Wildmont listened and thought at the same time. There was danger in the air, and it was time that he was doing something. He said nothing about his intentions, and left the Lair as though he meant to go back to Miss Arnaugh. When he got a short distance from Hank's, he dodged into the shadows; and, under cover of the night, sought, and found, the chief hotel in Blue Blazes.

The trial had really begun.

He did not care to be seen there, yet he boldly approached the open door. Above it was hanging a huge lantern, supported by an iron arm projecting from the wall. Outside there was not a man in sight, and within, every eye was turned in the direction of the prisoner. The colonel wore a broad-brimmed hat that evening—something unusual for him—and had his collar turned up, so that he was in a semi-disguise. Standing just under the lamp, which threw a circle of light all around him, but a shadow over him, he was not likely to be recognized by the spectators of the trial. Their attention was fixed in the other direction.

Belshazzar had finished his statement, and Ugly Jackson was just introducing Jack Briggs.

Wildmont knew well enough what the testimony of this witness would amount to; but his story had been intended as a statement, and not as evidence. If Four Horse Frank cross examined the man, would his story hold water? And if the sport—who so far had been more reticent than had seemed possible—should once begin to talk, would he not say something that would never be forgotten? The excitement of the crowd was turning into interest, which was a bad sign. And there were some men there now who carried revolvers, and thought for themselves.

Colonel Wildmont gave a look around him, to see that the coast was still clear, and then made up his mind.

He stood in the shadow, but in front of him was a blaze of light. He could trust the half-dozen men who were between him and the rest; and he could hit the business of a dollar at the distance of the length of the room every time.

When he pulled trigger, Four Horse Frank would drop; he was as certain of that as he was of his own existence; and he could do it with very little risk to himself.

Jack Briggs rose up; and so did the colonel's hand. He knew that he would have time for only one shot, if he wished to get away unrecognized, and he intended to make sure work. His hand never wavered; he covered the sport; he pulled the trigger.

And just at the right fraction of a second there came the shade of an interruption.

It was neither the devil itself, nor a fiction of his own disordered brain, though the colonel thought of both, as he turned at the crack of his pistol, and fled away.

A mocking, mowing, gibbering face had swung suddenly into view, a face that was upside down, and a condensed travesty on a human one. He heard a chattering in an unknown tongue, while a hand, paw, or bundle of claws, clutched at his pistol-arm, and as the pistol-hammer fell, touched it lightly.

Frank was down—of that the colonel was certain. Was he dead, stunned, or only dodging? Had his hand wavered before the bullet sped, or was it afterward? And what in horror was the interruption?

The interruption was in reality a fresh arrival from the mountains. Jocko had become tired of being thrown on his own resources, and was afraid to re-enter the camp of the outlaws. He preferred houses, and the other conveniences of human habitation, and made his way straight to town. The Grand Occidental had been peculiarly attractive during his previous brief stay in Blue Blazes, and now he proposed to investigate it at his leisure. He was used to crowds, and approached the door fearlessly. He thought some of entering, but looking about, saw the iron arm that supported the lantern.

The iron was far enough above the reach of a mere man; but Jocko was a monkey. Just as Wildmont was coming fairly in sight of the building, Jocko was settling himself on his perch.

The colonel halted beneath him, and Jocko grinned. He made motions toward Wildmont's hat, shook his fingers, and hugged himself over his own ideas. If the distance was only not quite so great! Then, when Wildmont poised his revolver, Jocko twisted his tail around the iron arm, and swung himself bodily downward, reaching for the arm that unfortunately was not exactly where he wanted it. He touched it though, and that was enough. At touch and report the colonel turned and fled.

Inside, the sound of the shot, and the dropping of the two men behind the bar, produced almost as much excitement as the finding of Fancy's body. Half of the crowd surged to the door in an instinctive movement to get out of harm's way, or to see who had fired.

The other half started up to rush at the bar. Perhaps Wildmont would have been seen but for the prompt action of half a dozen men—those he had counted on. Without knowing the rights of the case, they simply put their shoulders together and blocked the way, while pretending to be trying to struggle forward.

As for the rush that went the other way—the crowd found Four Horse Frank soon enough.

"Hold on!" he shouted, as he rose behind the bar, with Belshazzar in his arms.

"I don't think that's much harm done; but some one has taken a foul shot at the bailiff; an' ef I thought this camp was low down enough ter back him up, I'd open out with both hands, an' die gittin' even. You thar, stand back, an' give him air! Ef thar's a doctor handy in this burg, hustle him out."

He glanced over the bar as he spoke, and saw that Ugly Jackson and some of the jury had made the best of their time in corraling the cartridges of dynamite; but he had Belshazzar's revolvers, and his own. If the general attack was coming he was still ready to meet it.

But as he laid Belshazzar's motionless body on the bar, and the attack that was bound to come briefly hung fire, Dandy Webb came pushing his way into the room, shouting as he came:

"Hold on, thar! Fur jest a holy minnit hold on! Fancy ain't dead, an' they're bringing him here. He'll be along, in a minnit, an' make a clean breast. It'll wake up Blue Blazes when he does; an' you'll find the sport never tetch'd him!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COLONEL'S DERRINGER TALKS.

THE shouted news of Dandy Webb made another sensation, and under cover of the confusion Dandy slipped up to Four Horse Frank, who was bending over Belshazzar, anxious to examine into the injury to the bailiff, but by no means willing to take his eyes altogether off of the men of Blue Blazes.

"Don't crowd 'em," he whispered. "Ef you

kin keep things lovely tell Fancy gits hyer ther' will be fun ter last a week, an' it'll let you all out. That kid is just old bizzness. When they got through with the'r inquest he sed mebbe he wasn't dead. The room was pretty empty, so he filled it up with some of his pards, an' he an' that feller with ther cane, jest brought him ter life. He's goin' to tell all about it; an' oh, won't Blue Blazes be happy?"

The sport scarcely heard him. He understood enough to know that the turn in the game that he had been so long looking for had come at last; but for the present his attention was centered on the bailiff.

Belshazzar was either hard hit, or but little injured. When the monkey swept the revolver of Wildmont aside he saved Frank, but came very near making an end to the marshal. The bullet caught him high up on the forehead, and he dropped without a groan.

There was a doctor in Blue Blazes, but at that moment he was busy elsewhere, with little chance of being found in time to do any good here, and when Frank looked again he was almost willing to believe that he was not needed. There was plenty of life in that frame yet, and consciousness appeared to be coming back.

At that the sport slipped back a little, and whispered to Roaring Bob, who had edged closer as a chorus of cries from the street announced that there was something about to be developed.

"Keep an eye on him when he first comes to, and see what he says. I've been experimenting big on him, but so far it hasn't brought out anything worth a cent. And just now maybe I had better watch this crowd. Some one may be trying another shot when they see the game is up."

Rob looked strangely at the sport, and then at the marshal, whose form was beginning to quiver with returning life.

"I'll do it, young man, an' perhaps I can guess at what you're driving at a heap sight closer than you think. Look out for Ugly Jackson, and I'll risk it that the rest will leave it to him and the jury, an' go for a sight at Fancy."

Dandy had dropped back again, and was looking after things in front.

"You want to go slow, Ugly," he was saying.

"The time fur funny work has jest slipped by, and in a minute by the clock this camp will be as willing to hang the man that tries it on as they were to go for the sport when they thought that Fancy was dead. Don't forget that there's several of us lookin' at you, and at the first crooked move down you go."

"What yer growlin' about?" grumbled Jackson, looking covertly around, and getting but little comfort from the glance.

"Ef this camp wants to draw off I'm not runnin' things. But ef we find ther sport or his friends playin' roots you kin jest look out. That's all."

There was but little danger that any one would try a shot at Roaring Rob, as long as Dandy was keeping Ugly Jackson's attention occupied, and Rob could safely give his whole attention, and any little ministrations that might be needed, to the reviving man. And one thing he did that scarcely seemed to be needed. He not only loosened the collar of Belshazzar's shirt, but he turned it back until the broad breast beneath it was exposed. He was looking curiously at a scar there, a peculiar mark, that looked as though it might have been made with a three sided dagger, when the bailiff opened his eyes.

At first he stared around him with a bewildered look. Then his eyes fell upon Roaring Rob, and he seemed to recognize him; for, after a brief silence, he put his hand up to his head, in an inquiring sort of way, and feebly but audibly murmured:

"When I fool around dynamite again let me know of it. For half a minute I thought I was a goner, for sure. Seemed as though the old tunnel had all caved in. Where's the rest of the team?"

"All done up but you and me," was Rob's prompt answer. "And you ain't hurt bad, are you, pard? You know me yet?"

"Oh, I'm all right. Nothing but a knock on the head that I won't feel by morning. But, how's this? Where are we? This ain't the Crack Claim, by a long shot. You don't mean to say it wasn't all a dream? I—I—swear I don't understand it. What's going on, and where the deuce and who the deuce am I?"

"Don't get excited," said Rob, soothingly. "It'll take some little time to explain it all, but you're all right side up, with care. You remember Belshazzar Brick, don't you?"

"What's he got to do with it? Never heard the name before in my life. Speak up, Sinclair. The tunnel must have caved in after all. Are the rest of the boys dead? and how did we get away? And—and—blame me if I understand this. Speak up, man. Have we found the lead?"

The late bailiff of Blue Blazes looked as thoroughly bewildered as a man well could and yet appear sane.

Roaring Rob appeared to understand it all, though.

"Come, old man, you have had a narrow squeak of it, and maybe the less you talk about things to-night the better it will be. Take an

old pard's advice, and try to get a good night's sleep. In the morning we can get it all clear as a whistle. I reckon, if it will ease your mind any, that the lead is just where we left it, and if the rest of the team has gone up the flume, I wouldn't be surprised. This camp is having a jamboree to-night that you oughtn't to mix in, and if we can get to a room quietly we'll let them have it out while we lay off and compare notes. How in thunder you come to get away is more than I can see, but it's too soon to ask questions."

"But what camp's this? There wer'n't no such camp within a hundred mile or so of the Trump Card. Say! Have I been wanderin'? That must be it. Ther hull thing caved in when we touched off the dynamite, and I would have been a goner if you hadn't stuck by me. I might have known you would have stayed. Put it there, pard, put it right there. The Four Horse Team is broke, then; but you and I, pard, can run in double harness, and when we reach the lead again we'll make things hum. Pick our flints and try it again, eh? The Trump Card will turn out a bonanza yet. But say, pard, what became of the wealth—a hundred thousand the nuggets and all will weigh—and how did that blast come to go off so soon? There's a heap ter talk of. The sooner we get to that room the better. And this hurt on my head makes things seem a little queer. Of course you know how it is, but I don't care to talk to any one else till I get straight again. I'll be all right to-morrow morning, won't I?"

"Just one question," said the Four Horse Sport, leaning over to touch Rob on the shoulder.

"You know, and I think I ought to. Who is this man, really?"

"You have been playin' yer cards to find out as well as if you knowed already," answered Rob in a tone so low that it could scarcely have reached the bailiff's ears.

"That man were one of the 'riginal Four Horse Team, that located the Trump Card and Crack Claim Mines. And he's the only true and 'riginal Four Horse Frank."

"Thank the Lord! And if that be so he is Frank Midford, the elder; and the man we all want to see. Get him away if you can. The bullet that creased his head has brought back his senses, and you want to look out now that he don't go under with brain fever. When he has rested up a little I must have a talk with him; but you want to break everything gently. Now, I'll see if this 'other nonsense can't be finished up; though I suspect that there has a better hand than mine taken hold of the drag-ropes, and will pull for all it can find in the net."

"All right. You kin bet I'm doin' my best for him, now that I've dropped to his bein' an old pard. I was one of the Four Horse Team myself, but I never gave it away before. Hope I'll see you later."

But the wish of the man who had been known to the camp only as Roaring Rob, was lost to the sport, who had already stepped from behind the bar, and was coolly and unmolestedly gliding away.

Rob's eyes followed him for a moment, and he pursed up his lips in something that resembled a silent whistle—if such a thing could be imagined. The sport had made no great change, and yet he had suddenly dropped a disguise and become another man. The beard was gone from his face, and he resembled—well—some one that Rob had seen, years ago.

And then, turning his glance toward the door, as the sport passed behind a screen that momentarily hid him from view, he saw Colonel Wildmont come hastily across the room, his right hand in the side pocket of his sack coat and his eyes resting on the screen.

As Rob saw the one face, and thought of the other, he gave a start and a cry; but he was too late. He heard what he recognized as the report of the colonel's derringer. After that there was a muffled cry, and the sound of a heavy fall.

What had taken place behind the screen?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FATED TO FALL.

OF course all Blue Blazes had not been standing around, hands in pockets, waiting for this remarkable development. It would never have been allowed such an uninterrupted course, if there had not been something else commanding interest to claim attention.

In the first place, the bailiff and the prisoner were left in charge of Ugly Jackson and the jury, when the crowd realized the extent of the news that Dandy Webb had so hurriedly announced.

As the trial would not go on, for a time at least, and as the pistol-shot at Belshazzar had not done the damage at first supposed, it was only natural that every one should want a sight of Fancy, whose revelations would clear away what was now a very interesting mystery.

Some lingered in the room a little, but as the wounded man did not come in, they went out. Ugly Jackson might have risked a shot at the prisoner if Dandy had not paid him such close

attention, but he slipped out a little after the rest—and was never seen in the camp again.

Fancy was very much alive; and after Sonny Sharp had got hold of him, and got the wheels of life to running once more, he had no intention of dying. He preferred, when he found who had him, to get even with the man who had attempted his life, by making a clean breast of it. He was not as strong as he was before he had been so snugly tucked away for rest among the mesquites, but he could use his tongue, and was certain it would not hurt him to appear before the court that had been organized at the Grand Occidental if they would only carry him there. Indeed, he refused to speak otherwise, save to say that Four Horse Frank had nothing to do with the attack upon him.

The little detective had, somehow, half a dozen men at his back, who were strangers to the camp, but who were resolute and ready for business. They looked very closely after Fancy, and it was by four of them that he was carried, when he approached the hotel. As the rush from the doors began these men set him down, and looked again at Sonny for orders.

"Oh, if they are all coming out here, we may as well stop right where we are," said the little detective.

"Keep an eye out for our friend, in case Davis and his pard have missed his trail; and if he turns up, see that he don't get away, and does no mischief. Now, then, Fancy, the crowd is here, or hereabouts, and it is time to say your little speech."

"I'd sooner say it inside, if there was room for it, but I want all Blue Blazes to hear me when I do talk. You are sure that you have good men around, that will stay with me till I get done? There's men that would risk their lives any way to keep me from talkin'."

Sonny turned from Fancy to the crowd, and as he turned he threw back the lapel of his coat to show the star that was on his breast.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a hard, cold voice that no one would ever have taken for that of Maurice Montmorenci.

"This thing has come to light a good deal faster than I had expected, and disguise is hardly of any use longer. I am a United States Marshal as well as a detective, and I came down here on a double errand. I am not alone, by a long sight; and the man or men that undertake to interfere with the course of the law will find it very unhealthy. We have gathered in a lot of our men that were out in the bushes, and now we are after the balance that are left in town. You can just figure it out that any man who tries to interfere with Fancy's story belongs to the gang; and you will see him go down accordingly. You honest ones will see where to take hold if the rascals try any of their monkey tricks on yours truly, Sonny Sharp."

Then Fancy raised himself to a sitting posture and solemnly held up his hand.

"I swear that the man who called himself Four Horse Frank had nothing to do with my attempted death, though he had abundant reason to fear me, since he knew that if I had the chance I would take his life. The gang believed him to be Dan Garland, the detective, and that he was here to ferret us out and bring us to justice. They would have killed him quick enough if one of the captains had not wanted to use him in another way."

"One of the captains?" asked Sonny, somewhat surprised at the revelation.

"Yes. One worked here, and the other out there; but they pulled together, and the men were all the same. The first Captain Howl moved to Blue Blazes when he struck it rich, and some of us came in, though we all went out when we were needed; and we knew that if any of the gang were pulled up it would be sultry for the rest of us."

"And now, Fancy, who is the man that tried to have you killed because you wanted to slaughter this sport against his orders? Speak it slow, and so that every one can hear you. Remember that we have evidence to back up every word you say."

Sonny was young yet, and was fond of dramatic surprises. He stepped a little to one side and waved his hand as if to call up some spirit with a spell. He knew he was going to give Blue Blazes a sensation, and one of his aides had just whispered him that the man he wanted could not escape the toils.

"I swear," said Fancy, again raising his hand.

And then a little flash of light went sweeping past Sonny's head, and a knife buried itself in Fancy's breast, with a sickening "chug."

Sharp as he was, by name as well as by nature, Sonny would never have known who gave that underhanded cast of the knife, that forever cut short the flow of Fancy's revelations, if it had not been for a lightning-like spring of Gerald Sinclair, who had been standing around, his cane to his mouth, and taking no apparent interest in the strange history that was being evolved.

Before any one else had moved, he had a man, of twice his weight and of very desperate appearance, over his hip; and while he held him so, one of Sonny's strangers slipped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists. The fellow belonged

at the Crack Claim, and there was no knife in his belt.

There was more confusion than ever, just then; and under its cover a man left the outskirts of the crowd and entered the Grand Occidental.

This man was Colonel Wildmont. He had not heard the revelations of Fancy very plainly, but he could give a shrewd guess at what was coming. He had his hand on his derringer, and would have risked a shot himself if he could have covered him through the crowd. He might have downed Sonny Sharp, with a bullet through his brain; but if he had but one more chance to launch his venom, there was a man he wanted worse—the sport that insisted on being Four Horse Frank, even at the risk of his life.

The colonel entered the bar-room as Frank turned away from Roaring Rob and the revived marshal; and the colonel gave a strange smile as he saw the altered face. It was a younger face, and a face that was very much like his own.

No one seemed to notice him, and he saw that when Frank passed behind the screen he would be hidden from the eyes of the few that were yet within the room.

With his hand in his pocket, the hammer of his derringer back, the colonel stepped rapidly across the room and passed behind the screen. He saw the hated face almost at his side, and without hesitation pulled the trigger.

And then occurred the strangest thing—there was but one report, it was the colonel's derringer that spoke, and his bullet that had gone straight home; yet it was Wildmont that sunk to the floor, and he had his own bullet in his brain.

If the colonel had looked he would have seen the open window through which Frank had swung himself the moment he had passed out of sight; and if he had listened he would have heard the skurry of his own horse's hoofs, bearing the sport away. If he had given only a second glance he would have seen that he was standing face to face with himself, as reflected in the pride of the place—the great mirror of the Grand Occidental. He held low down, and a little nickel-plate, and a rivet, flung the bullet back at him, to crash through his temple, and into his brain.

"Little woman, you played me fair, and I won't see you drop into trouble this time without a warning and a chance. I'm not Dan Garland; but that gentleman is on the ground, and between him and Sonny Sharp there will be a very fair clean up. They are scooping them all in at the Occidental, and sooner or later they will be around, inquiring after you. Dan has dropped to the "queer" business; Sonny is after the road-agents; while I have found all I was looking for, the original Four Horse Frank, who located the Crack Claim, and was my father to boot. There's a Roland for your Oliver. If Dan had not played roots on me the last time I saw him, and kept his mouth too close to be good for my health, maybe I wouldn't have given you the hint. You can take it or not, just as you have a mind to; but if you don't, Dan won't be too good to send you in along with the rest. So long. They will want me back at the Occidental bad, so I haven't time to tarry. This is the colonel's horse at the door, and I reckon he will have no need for him in the future. You know the way over the mountains, and if I had anything to say I should remark, git thar, Eli."

The speaker was of course the sport, who had slipped away to make himself even with the woman who had trusted him even beyond the trust of womankind, and had perhaps saved his life when she set him free at the den. Probably his aim was accomplished since her name did not appear in the list of those taken in at the roundup.

It is true that Aileen had joined in the plot to recapture him, at the Grand Occidental—but as she evidently repented of her share in it, when it failed, Frank had so thoroughly forgiven her that he had forgotten all about it.

On his return he came across the two Italians. They were lingering about the door of the hotel, looking for Jocko. They had fled with the outlaws, been captured by the officers, and finally were turned loose again in Blue Blazes. Frank had enough to do managing his own affairs, and could give them no aid. He was troubled about his father, though, and not on his own account. He felt certain that there would be no more talk of a trial now, and if there was, the sober, solid citizens were on foot. They were slow to come, but backed by the officers, had the power to see justice done. In their hands he would feel no fear.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FURTHER PARTICULARS CONTAINED IN THE SMALL BILLS.

It was just as well that Roaring Ralph did not allow himself to be drawn away from the business in hand, and that he hurried the late Belshazzar away under cover of the confusion. Another shock might have once more unsettled that sorely tried brain.

And the sight of the face of the man who fell behind the screen would have been a shock, since he would have recognized it now, in spite

of all the years since his own eyes had seen it last. I say his own eyes, because, as Belshazzar Brick, he had forgotten all that had gone before; and now that the chance bullet along his skull had made him himself once more he had forgotten all that went between. By morning the good work was permanent, and he could hear the strange story told to him without more than wonder that such a thing could be.

By the time that the sport got back from his flying visit to Aileen Arnaugh, the detectives and their prisoners were entrenched at the Occidental, save that Sonny Sharp was looking after the dying colonel, and adding his explanations to those brief ones that Wildmont muttered, as the detective moistened his lips with stimulants and wondered how he had lost his man unless the colonel had shot himself in despair.

It was something of a shock to the greater part of Blue Blazes to learn that the driving mine-owner, who had been so popular with the town, had been the chief of a gang of road-agents, as well as a member of a counterfeiters' gang, and that he had not severed his connection with either, but was still the ruling spirit of both, up to the time of his death, though there had been another Captain Howl who served as his alternate. It was a surprise to know that the road-agents had moved through their camp at times, and that a good many of them were there now, and the rest had been quietly gobbled up that afternoon; but probably the revelation in regard to Belshazzar Brick, which came later on, was as strange a part of the story as anything they heard.

It may be as well to give the facts as they were, without regard to the version as told about the camp, that night, although the reader has already suspected what they were.

Frank Midford—afterward known to Blue Blazes as Belshazzar Brick—in company with his brother Walter, Frank Sinclair, and another man named Frank Edwards had constituted the Four Horse Team, who originally located the Crack Claim, or the Trump Card mine, as it was variously called. Frank Midford was the original Four Horse Frank, and had been suspected of the murder of Jean Janvrin before he came to what, in the old days, was known as Bad Luck Bar.

He had picked up these pards on the way, and as he was under a sobriquet made no objection to his brother's assuming the name of Frank Bailey.

They had struck it rich in the Crack Claim, till the lead dropped. They arranged a blast, and when, the next day, it prematurely exploded, at least three of the four were buried in the tunnel.

Walter Midford got gold and revenge, at the same time. He went back East, and with apparent proof of his brother's death went as far as he could toward depriving Mrs. Midford of the fortune her husband had abandoned to her.

The wealth that he had captured did him no good. He lost it all, and became a hunted man. He had been firmly convinced that the Crack Claim had only been a pocket that had been worked out, or he might have tried his fortunes there sooner, and not have become connected with the double scheme of robbery and counterfeiting that finally drifted him into Blue Blazes, along with Aileen Arnaugh, whom he had found at the head of the gang.

It turned out that, just at the time that Walter made his exit, leaving his pards behind him in the tunnel, the Indians had surprised the camp and cleaned it out so thoroughly that for some time its name even was forgotten. The Crack Claim lay ready to his hand, for as yet, there were only a few miners again on the spot, they working in what they began to think a worked out, or a barren field. It was his opening out the mine on a new level that brought another rush, and made Blue Blazes what it became.

But meantime the bones of the rest of the team did not repose in the shattered tunnel. All the pards got out alive, yet each thinking that the mine was a failure, and that he was the only survivor. The work of the Indians was plain enough, and none tarried there. An injury to his head had warped Frank Midford's mind so that he imagined himself another man, and a handbill found in his pocket started him after the Four Horse Frank, whom he believed had done him the injury of which he was aware, without understanding the consequences.

Roaring Rob had come drifting back in course of time. His name had been Frank Sinclair when he was one of the Team, and he, like Frank Midford, had changed so much that Colonel Wildmont had not recognized him. He had become something of a vagabond, and took life in a rough and tumble way. He had his suspicions in regard to the present proprietor of the Crack Claim, but, up to the opening of this story, had not unvailed them. The appearance of a man claiming to be Four Horse Frank, and another giving the name of Gerald Sinclair, made him suspicious, since he had already recognized the little detective in the woman's dress, and was certain that the other men were frauds. He was anxious to know what the detectives were after, and though he found that

the suspected musicians were genuine, he was ready to stay by the false Frank to the last.

And the false Four Horse Frank was the young Midford who ran away from home when his father married again. Under a different guise he had met Marion, heard her story, and as he had already made some inquiries in regard to his too long forgotten father, he understood that she was looking for his uncle. In his researches he had received aid from Dan Garland; and the latter had allowed him to start for Blue Blazes without a hint that he expected to be on the ground almost immediately. He was rounding up on the gang of law-breakers there, and, entering the town while the passengers by the coach were at supper, lost no time in getting at work, in a disguise so perfect that his own men did not know him.

Then, there was Sonny Sharp who was working for him, as well as for Marion; John More, who took his share in the operations; and half a dozen men, who represented the mere brute force of the expedition. Altogether it was a formidable army, that invaded the district, and their operations were as rapid as they were successful.

An outlying scout of Wildmont's had sent word that Dan Garland was coming, under the guise of Four Horse Frank. He found out too late, of his mistake, and was responsible for a great share of the complication that followed. As the reader knows, Wildmont was aware of Marion's quest, had interviewed her beforehand, and when Midford, junior, put in his appearance, fathomed finally his disguise, and using the second Captain Howl in the night interview, thought he could gain his own profit out of him.

After returning from the retreat of the outlaws, Sonny Sharp promised to place a guard at her door, and Marion went to bed with a pretty fair prospect for an attack of brain fever. Yet she fell asleep before the real work of the round-up began, and having slumbered straight through the night, woke in the morning to find that her quest was at an end. Not only was the treacherous Walter Midford dead, but her step-father had been resurrected, and was willing to do ample justice to her mother, and the child that he had never seen.

The real Four Horse Frank was quite a different man from the late Four Horse Frank; and was astounded when he learned of the vastly increased value of that real estate he thought he had left to the wife from whom he had drifted away. He was willing enough to go back to look after his affairs and his family; but first he made sure of the Crack Claim; and his brother's effects, so far as he could find the latter. Since Frank Edwards—who at times had assumed the name of Four Horse Frank—was undoubtedly dead, Roaring Rob came in for an undivided half interest in the Crack Claim, which, when the lead was found under his management, turned out a regular bonanza.

The second Captain Howl had fallen to Frank Midford's shot, and Aileen Arnaugh made good her escape; but enough of the gang were captured to make a good showing, Red Hank being one of the leaders in the bogus money division. The prisoners were all started off under a strong guard; and Sonny Sharp, after a satisfactory interview with Miss Lytton, went with them. A day or so later, Marion, accompanied by the Midfords—father and son—started eastward. Frank, junior, had a little fortune of his own, and professed a desire to get once more within the pale of civilization. Marion, having a woman's penetration, shrewdly suspected that civilization as understood by him meant—Marion. Before they reached home there was an understanding, and the journey became a regular triumphal procession.

There was one thing that had puzzled Marion, and one day she spoke of it to her devoted esquire.

"One thing was a mystery to me. I heard a great deal of Dan Garland, the great detective; but as far as I could hear, no one saw him at Blue Blazes, and that little Sharp appeared to be getting all the glory. He was not Garland in disguise, was he?"

"Bless your soul, no; but he was a lieutenant to tie to. The fact is, that on such occasions Dan don't appear very prominently, and I doubt if any one but Sonny could have sworn to his presence. Of course he was there, but unless he was the little dude, that professed to be (without knowing it, however,) Roaring Rob's son, I wouldn't like to swear who I thought he was. And I'll bet you he fooled even Sonny to the last, and never let on who he was till he had to. All the same, it was my frolic, and Dan Garland's big round-up."

THE END.

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